

Regis University ePublications at Regis University

All Regis University Theses

Spring 2008

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Jen Janes

Regis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/theses>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Janes, Jen, "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare" (2008). *All Regis University Theses*. 497.
<https://epublications.regis.edu/theses/497>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Regis University Theses by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

Regis University
Regis College
Honors Theses

Disclaimer

Use of the materials available in the Regis University Thesis Collection ("Collection") is limited and restricted to those users who agree to comply with the following terms of use. Regis University reserves the right to deny access to the Collection to any person who violates these terms of use or who seeks to or does alter, avoid or supersede the functional conditions, restrictions and limitations of the Collection.

The site may be used only for lawful purposes. The user is solely responsible for knowing and adhering to any and all applicable laws, rules, and regulations relating or pertaining to use of the Collection.

All content in this Collection is owned by and subject to the exclusive control of Regis University and the authors of the materials. It is available only for research purposes and may not be used in violation of copyright laws or for unlawful purposes. The materials may not be downloaded in whole or in part without permission of the copyright holder or as otherwise authorized in the "fair use" standards of the U.S. copyright laws and regulations.

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE: OUR COLLECTIVE NIGHTMARE

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Graduation with Honors

by

Jen Janes

May 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
------------------------------	----

INTRODUCTION: THE COLLECTIVE NIGHTMARE	1
--	---

PART 1: CANNIBALISM

I. INTRODUCTION	6
-----------------	---

II. CHAPTER 1: ZOMBIES	7
------------------------	---

III. CHAPTER 2: VAMPIRES	12
--------------------------	----

IV. CHAPTER 3: INBRED HICKS	20
-----------------------------	----

V. CONCLUSION	39
---------------	----

PART 2: IDENTITY

I. CHAPTER 1: THE FLESH	40
-------------------------	----

II. CHAPTER 2: THE MASK	63
-------------------------	----

III. CHAPTER 3: THE MIND	78
--------------------------	----

CONCLUSION: SOCIETY	97
---------------------	----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	105
--------------	-----

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Introduction: The Collective Nightmare

Robin Wood once wrote that horror films “are our collective nightmares.” They are our repressed wishes recreated in the image of the loathsome, and the depths of our subconscious fears incarnated as threats to our lives, well-being, and very culture itself (174). The argument that a horror film is an incarnation of the time and culture’s unconscious fears is compelling. Many older movies no longer frighten us after the passage of time has caused those fears to evolve into others. As Christopher Kelly once said, “...the horror genre, perhaps more than any other, often reflects the mood of the time...” (54). The films under examination in this thesis, particularly *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, all carry elements of the moods of their times. Several other films besides *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* illuminate the themes under examination, but ultimately, all build up to it.

Very often we cannot face the true horror of our lives because it is too difficult for us to handle. Our greatest fears must hide from us in our unconscious minds, because it is the only way we can cope with them. When we do confront our fears, we must do so through symbolic, hypothetical, and entertaining scenarios like films. Horror films are filled with subterranean, almost secret symbolic meanings, and their monsters are our political and social fears in imaginary, mythic terms, particularly, “The gist of horror is facing evils in everyday life. This is to say that the genius of horror is subtext: symbolism that creeps beneath surface meanings to assault our dreams and awaken our minds” (Nelson 382-383). Even if it may seem that certain films carry no meaningful themes whatsoever, several of them may, in fact, be inadvertently infused with social subtexts

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

that escape the notice of writers, directors, and viewers alike. Some writers and directors intentionally convey themes of importance to them, most notably Wes Craven, and some films truly are mindless entertainment. Yet we must take into consideration the important point that much of the most famous horror is famous for a reason: it appeals to our hidden fears and desires.

From the middle of the last century until the beginning of ours, our collective nightmare of today is no longer the collective nightmare of yesterday. The fifties showed us a nightmare of differing ideologies, and gave us a hero of the norm to conquer it. The sixties brought us a new horror of a new society conquering the old, with good and evil practically indistinguishable. This nightmare continued through the decades, showing us a dark subculture conquering a mainstream one.

We may wonder if horror films are the product of an individual's imagination and meaningless in the context of society at large. However, the history and trend of filmmaking in America suggest otherwise. In early 20th century Hollywood, films were often made with an eye toward making money in the most efficient way possible, and therefore rolled off assembly lines in massive numbers. Such films "often are better indexes of public concerns, shared myths, and mores than individually conceived, more intentionally artistic films are" (Monaco 208-209). Little changed into the seventies, when Hollywood continued to focus on money as its first and only love, using the blockbuster system – putting huge amounts of money into movies for even huger profits – almost exclusively for efficiency and profit (212).

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Specifically, the American horror genre evolved from subversion of the norm to realization that the norm may not be worth saving. Of all these films, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* encapsulates the changing of these nightmares. It is apocalyptic, depicting a catastrophe so complete that societal life can never be the same. The *Massacre*'s apocalypse is not only destructive, but frighteningly revealing, removing the illusions our culture casts over our cannibalistic and consumptive lifestyles (Phillips 102).

Our culture feasts upon the lifeblood of others, namely in the form of currency. It feasts upon its own kind just as much as it feeds on others. The lines we draw between self and other are even more frightening in that they are arbitrary. Any member of society can be the victim, and any member of society can be the killer. It feeds on its own kind through credit card and other debt, and its citizens know happiness only through shopping and consumption. Currently, personal consumption accounts for 65% of our GDP (Taylor 1). Consumption is not just a pastime; it is a lifestyle. We of the recent horror moviegoers are in the unique position of finding ourselves depicted as both predator and prey, cannibal and lunch. This dualism exists because of the particular state of our identities in relation to advertising images and the aim of capitalism itself. Writers such as Barber argue that capitalist advertisers use the concept of autonomy and empowerment that actually make us "vulnerable, unprotected, and susceptible to outside manipulation." (32). We stand in for the young, carefree, pleasure-seeking youths who tend to populate such films, and we also stand in for the chainsaw-wielding psychopaths who destroy in order to consume and live.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The result is a conflict of opposing forces which capitalism brings together in ways ultimately detrimental to us. Advertisers, the voice of the capitalist system in general culture, attempt to make us feel that the system can give us the power and freedom to determine our own identities. However, advertisers add the condition that we can only have this power and freedom through our money. Our dollars, they argue, are the votes we cast in the capitalist democracy. Yet when we rely on useless products of capitalism to fulfill our whims and self-determination, we actually surrender our autonomy and freedom and allow the system to determine our identities for us. The idea that we can purchase our own freedom and sense of self-worth eventually enslaves us by turning us into overgrown infants completely dependent on the system for our every desire. The conflict extends to ourselves, because as we are enslaved, we also contribute to the system that enslaves us. We lend our labor to our systematic enslavement in order to possess the buying power with which the system enslaves us.

Ultimately, our culture needs horror, because it shows us what we are, and it shows us what our lives are truly like. Scientific and aesthetic abstractions have, in a way, divorced us from the physical world. Horror films, with all their carnality and blood, bring us “back into communication with the physical world.” (Monaco 307). It is as if so much stimulation controls our lives that we must desensitize ourselves and lock ourselves into a sensory bubble. We hide from the rest of the world, and sometimes we must be confronted with our true fears in order to feel human (*The American Nightmare*).

Our capitalist social problems in particular are issues we hear about so often that we shut off our feelings to them, and yet they secretly frighten us, because we know that

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

we could fall prey to them. We are the slab of human meat. We are the vampire minion, perpetrating evil because we have no other choice. We are the lost young wandering through a desert of hopelessness. And most importantly, we are the spectator, watching the films and trying to make sense of our lives, trying to penetrate the bubble that encircles us, trying to find a way to understand who we are.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Part 1: Cannibalism

Introduction

From the late 1960s to the early 21st century, cannibalism in American horror films begins to take on highly capitalist connotations. Human flesh and blood in these films are commodities with distinct exchange values in an underground marketplace, whose merchants trade and consume them, much like we do in the mainstream market of conventional commodities. As such, we must both fear and sympathize with cannibalistic monsters, for they are our own representatives. We, like George Romero's zombies in the *Night of the Living Dead* series, instinctually perpetrate indiscriminate destruction to attain utterly useless ends. We, like the countless Draculas that have arisen menacingly from dank coffins, walk the earth for the sole purpose of perpetuating empty aristocratic existences. We, like the backwater hicks of *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, must often do terrible things, or contribute to a society that does terrible things, in order to bring home the headcheese. To sympathize with the cannibal, as we often do in later horror, is to acknowledge something cannibalistic about our own lifestyles, particularly in the form of capitalistic consumerism.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Chapter 1: Zombies

We operate within a context of a somewhat decaying presence of spirituality in art and culture. As Stone notices,

Horror films frequently construct evil, for example, even if unconsciously, within familiar religious coordinates – and in the West that has meant specifically Christian coordinates. With the disintegration of Christendom, however, these coordinates are increasingly losing their hold on the popular imagination (2).

With the loss of what Stone calls “Christian coordinates” in horror, this leaves us only mortal and decaying flesh, and we must cope with issues of our own mortality with a depreciated self value associated with the lack of an immortal soul.

George Romero, writer and director of the *Night of the Living Dead* series, remarked himself that, “The zombie for me was always the blue collar kind of monster, and he was us... We know we’re gonna die, right? So, we’re the living dead.” (*The American Nightmare*). With only meat with which to construct our self-perception, our bodies are desanctified, home to all of our living energy and identity, which can be easily destroyed and consumed. Still worse, our fleshy selves can even more easily be transformed into vessels of destruction, requiring only a certain amount of radiation to make us cannibalistic killers. In these ways, the *Night of the Living Dead* series alarmingly and grotesquely mirrors our own collective and individual natures.

This film also explores poles of opposition in our own ideology. In an attempt to replace the immortality religion offers, we create art such as films to keep our names alive after us, and also, from the viewers’ standpoint, to leave an image of our way of life

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

for future generations. However, we base this particular attempt to create a new immortality on an exploration of our flesh-bound mortality. Also, in the plots of the films themselves, the government uses technology and its advancement in an effort to leave a human mark on the world, but using this technology unleashes radiation which alters human flesh into monstrosity and further underscores our own lack of transcendent qualities. If radiation is the by-product of the human striving to matter, and this radiation can alter the human essence, then humans striving to matter actually prove that human beings do not matter outside the flesh.

In the first film of the series, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), radiation from atmospheric government experiments animates human corpses, who then proceed to eat the living. The film accentuates our status as mere meat in the final scene, in which vigilantes drag the corpse of the hero away to the fire with meathooks. No matter how much we may care about the hero, no matter how far he's come or how much he's overcome, he, and we, are still merely hunks of flesh endowed with temporary life. If the zombies do not entirely consume a living person, then he, too, becomes a zombie in a sort of macabre game of tag. However, the previous "it" remains a zombie after tagging the living, showing us that consuming someone else's flesh grants the consumer the power of that flesh.

When a human being becomes a zombie, he becomes part of the army of zombies, making it larger and stronger. In this way, the zombies are consumers of resources, functioning just as we do in the marketplace. We consume various goods in order to strengthen the quality of our own lives, and our global economy destroys anything that

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

gets in our way. A possible deviation from the metaphor lies in the fact that, while human beings produce products and then consume them, zombies simply consume without producing. However, the industries predicted to grow the most from 2006 to 2008 are not manufacturing, but service industries (CareerOneStop). For the most part, workers in our society, like the zombies, contribute to the workforce by gathering goods to consume, rather than producing them.

Dawn of the Dead (1978), the second film in the series, further explores the zombies' nature. By now the zombies are beginning a whole scale takeover of the entire planet, pushing humans back further and further. Remaining news programs describe the zombies as "pure instinct." This is a highly important feature of the film, as the zombies are explicitly forms of humans, and therefore they are acting on human instinct. Their instinct in this film is to aimlessly wander through the Mall of America, the high temple of consumption. There is no reason for zombies to inhabit a mall, and the humans trapped inside of it speculate that, since the mall was important to them as humans, their instincts lead them to it in (living) death.

However, the zombies' mass habitation of the mall is directly parallel to the humans' giggling looting spree of every department imaginable. The zombies and the humans are little different in this respect: they are both mindless consumers. The zombies could have no possible need for handbags, shoes, and other accessories, just as the humans can never loot enough articles of domesticity to make the dark world outside go away. Yet the zombies, just like the humans, somehow believe that the mall is the answer

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

to their problems. Both are irresistibly drawn to it for no reason other than to consume for consumption's sake.

When new products come out, such as the Xbox 360 or the iPhone, consumers camp out on the sidewalk to be the first to purchase these products at a staggeringly marked-up price. An iPhone commercial tells us that we survived for years without the product; the question is: how? We know that we can survive without the iPhone. The human race has plodded its course for millennia without being able to check its email on a mobile touch screen device. But the commercial rings true: we have no idea how we ever survived without it, and that is why we line up on the sidewalk all night waiting for our chance to pay six hundred dollars for one.

Just as we have no idea how to survive without a piece of technology that does nothing for our physical needs, the zombies clamor and swarm around products that do nothing for them physically. When our heroes are looting the mall, the zombies pile up at the glass separators, their faces pressed against the glass in uncontrollable desire, as if the humans themselves are products on display.

Furthermore, in *Day of the Dead* (1985), the final installment of the *Night of the Living Dead* series, we learn that the zombies have no stomachs and thereby get no nutritional benefits from eating people. We humans also have little need for what we consume. While we do need food to survive, it is (generally speaking) in such great supply in America that we do not even notice it. We, like the zombies, move in a lumbering mass across the face of the earth, not feeling the *need* for sustenance and destroying any civilization that will not allow us to consume it. Just as we have no idea

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

why we need the iPhone to survive, the zombies have no idea why they need human flesh in order to survive. All they know is that they want it and that they are somehow incomplete without it.

Our longing for such consumer products is far more unnatural than the zombies' longing for flesh. The zombies follow their natural instincts, while we corrupt the natural instinct through corporate advertising, and ultimately believe that it is not food we need, but a touch screen. Humans and zombies are alike, however, in that they want what they do not need, but want it simply because they do not have it. This is why zombies are so especially frightening: they truly are, as Romero says, us.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Chapter 2: Vampires

The evolution of the cinematic Dracula story begins with normalcy triumphing over evil, and reaches the current period with the nearly explicit representation of a sympathetic bourgeois vampire using human blood for currency. Dracula himself is not so much an incarnation of religious evil, but the incarnation of our darkest desires: power, wealth, and immortality - the price for which is blood. Vampires are representatives of the monied classes, as they are obviously aristocracy (Freeland Ch. 4). Yet, they also represent the upper classes because, while their lifestyles are often appealing, they live by feeding off the normal, everyday person, much as the literal upper classes do in the capitalist system. At the same time, we must sympathize with the vampires, because, like the bourgeois, they do not mean to be evil; they are simply living out their existences and do not know how to be different.

This very thought causes a great deal of controversy, as we saw when Ward Churchill published his essay “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” which referred to 9/11 victims as “little Eichmanns” (3). According to Churchill, the victims “formed a technocratic corps at the very heart of America’s global financial empire, ‘the mighty engine of profit’ to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved...” (3). However, the victims of the WTC were not necessarily nefarious people intent on destroying the rest of the world for their own personal benefit, and if they did glory in the capitalistic establishment which employed them, it was either out of ignorance or years of systematic loyalty training. Ultimately,

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

the victims were supporting a selfish and blood-thirsty system, but their true goal was to feed their families.

As such, they were not themselves vampires, but vampire minions, perhaps without even realizing it. The victims of the World Trade Center were not alone in this categorization. Any of us could be in the command of a vampire, but we must be under this command in order to survive. We need capital to survive, just as the vampires need blood to survive. The only alternatives to contributing to a vampire society are starvation and death. This creates a strong kinship between us and the vampires of popular lore, because the vampire can turn anyone into a minion – from scientists and businessmen to normal, average people walking the streets.

We, likely (and ironically) beginning with Marx, often use the analogy of blood as capital. We tend to diagnose economic problems as though they were physical illnesses, and our remedy is usually an increased flow of capital (Block 22-23). Thus, we see every economic illness as a deficiency of blood, and rather than discover the vampire feeding off of it, we simply supply more blood. As such, our economy and the faceless vampires that feed upon it have an unhealthy symbiotic relationship that can only be cured through excess. While Marx argued that it was the economy itself that was the vampire, leeching the blood of the workers in order to have the blood that courses through its own veins, we see the blood-as-currency metaphor in a way that ultimately leads us to a blood-like slavery. When the minions of the vampire economy discover that they are pale and weak, the vampires who have sucked their blood tell them that they need more blood to suck.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

There are several problems with the way our culture uses this allegory, since capital is not the only true lifeblood of the economy. For example, new technologies produce more capital on their own, ultimately giving sustenance to all levels of society, especially as the price of it goes down. Not only that, but organization within the system creates a circulatory system that makes the most efficient use of the blood contained within it: "...it can also be argued that organizations and organizational innovations are the lifeblood of the economy." (Block 23-24). Just as the circulatory system of the human body is not equal to the blood that runs through it, however, organizational patterns for the flow and transfer of currency in capitalist society are not its lifeblood, but its circulatory system.

Without this circulatory system, we simply have excess blood that is easily wasted upon those who would wish to exploit it. Thus, the capital-as-blood metaphor, as we use it, suggests that excess heals all wounds. Just as the zombies mindlessly seek more than they need, so the vampires tell us that all we need is more blood in order to survive and flourish. The end result is that we have no interest in the betterment of the circulatory system or in keeping blood inside it, but in constantly replacing the blood that we waste.

Again we face a contradiction of opposites. One goal is to perpetuate the vampire species. The other is to create a self-perpetuating and self-sufficient society conducive to survival. However, the capitalist system relies on over-consumption, and its over-consumption relies on waste and on taking from those less powerful. If we suck dry those less powerful, we lose the proletarian backbone of the system, and because the system

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

relies on the unwilling sacrifice of others to sustain itself, then it defies the American ethic of self-sufficiency while at the same time proclaiming it the guiding force of society. Furthermore, by sucking the oppressed dry, eventually the system cuts off its own life force, because without victims to supply the blood, or without workers or natural resources to create the capital, sooner or later resources will run out. So in the long run, the vampiric and capitalist systems are not conducive to self-perpetuating survival and run the risk of one day burning out.

Taste the Blood of Dracula (1970), one of a long-running series of Hammer Studios Dracula films, contains blatant representations of business and blood-sucking coming together. The film features three businessmen, who, under the guise of doing charity work, travel to the poor side of London for whores, strippers, booze, and other earthly, and preferably exotic, delights, all the while putting up a respectable front for the community. Bored with the usual, unsatisfactory earthly delights, the businessmen, with the help of a young man disowned by his family for occult behavior, decide to summon Dracula from the grave. In order to do this, someone must mingle his blood with the powdery remains of Dracula's, and then drink it. In this way, Dracula's presence must be bought with human blood. Further, the businessmen are not aristocrats; they appear to be merchants – the upper middle class. However, they feel a limitation in their middle class status, as they cannot obtain the pleasures they desire with it, and so wish to become one with an aristocrat. In fact, they wish to become one with *the* aristocrat – one who trades not in cash or securities, but in human blood. Also, they must be guided along this path by an aristocrat, the young Lord Courtley.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

This film does not explore Dracula himself, but the facades and lifestyles of the bourgeois characters. Dracula is simply a punishment. He goes after the children – young adults – of the businessmen, and turns them into vampires so that they can destroy their parents. Dracula visits this punishment upon them because, while they paid the price for Dracula's return with money (purchasing his cloak and the remains of his blood from another businessman), they paid no blood for it. The businessmen have failed to complete the transaction, and must pay penalties, and there is no Van Helsing to save the day. Dracula rarely speaks in this movie, is not at all sympathetic, and in this context is more like an angry loan shark than an undead supernatural force.

This depiction is both frightening and comforting. It is frightening because it accentuates the consequences of not wishing to serve the vampire. The businessmen are following capitalistic values in seeking upward mobility; they want pleasure and they are driven consumers, but they do not wish to consciously perpetrate evil. Yet Dracula visits the consequences upon them in the most horrible way: he goes after their children, symbolically robbing from a blood tie. Their lives are not the only ones hanging in the balance; we support vampiric corporate activity because we also have families to support. Our families bind us to vampiric activity just as they comfort us as we do it. The businessmen, however, like ourselves, are trapped. Any way they turn is disagreeable.

The comfort of this depiction, though, lies in the distinct black and white of good and evil. Dracula is evil, and so is Lord Courtley, who drinks Dracula's blood in order to reincarnate him. We know exactly who the vampire is. We do not have to wonder and sift through endless lies in order to find out who is forcing us into a life of parasitism at the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

expense of the weak. We also do not have to wonder if we are inadvertently serving vampires, as it is an obvious and conscious choice. Real life is not so simple. Ultimately, it is not the horror of the story alone that makes it frightening, but the mingling of truth and comfortable fiction. We are afraid because we are the businessmen, willing away our time with pleasures until we must go to greater and greater lengths to attain them. Our drive to consume becomes an addiction, and the only way we can support the addiction is to serve evil. Yet, even when we know we serve evil, the consequences for turning away from it are unbearable.

In *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1974), the final Hammer Studios Dracula sequel, unofficial investigation into occult activities reveals that powerful and important men are involved in Satanic rituals intended to reawaken Dracula. In these later sequels, Dracula returns again and again from his grave when a disciple allows him to become reincarnated in his flesh. The aristocrats in this film lust for power, and pay the price for it with their own flesh. When they pay this price, Dracula rises into powerful aristocratic positions from which he can do the greatest evil. Ultimately, flesh and blood are Dracula's currency. He demands it in exchange for sharing his power, and he demands this price when carrying out his rather motiveless revenge.

Interestingly, this film combines Dracula and biological warfare. Dracula finds a disciple in a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, and commissions him to create a new strain of the bubonic plague, which rots the flesh from the bones in a matter of seconds, in exchange for his power. Van Helsing speculates that Dracula intends to kill all of humanity, and in doing so kill himself, to eventually find peace in death. This can only be

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

done if his source of currency is eliminated, as Hammer Studios had a recurring habit of finding new minions through which Dracula could be endlessly reincarnated. Dracula here is more sympathetic than in all the other Hammer Dracula films. However, the price for Dracula's peace is flesh – his currency. Even peace must be bought with human flesh and blood, for, as we are fond of saying, "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Dracula 2000 (2000), Wes Craven's revamp of the old story, and the last major Dracula film to date, takes the tale in a whole new direction. Dracula himself becomes an altogether different character, turning out to be Judas Iscariot, cursed to walk the earth as the undead for betraying Christ. Furthermore, it is Van Helsing, not Dracula, who is the aristocrat. Rather, Dracula seems to have spent the last several years/decades locked inert in a silver coffin while Van Helsing has been living it up in an enormous high-tech mansion with a fortune which he himself admits was not gained through methods entirely legitimate. It is Van Helsing who preys on blood, using leeches to infuse Dracula's blood into his own veins, attempting to harness his power – much like the businessmen of earlier films.

Here, with the Christian references, the blood trade is clearly linked to the original crucifixion story. The human race seeks redemption, but the redemption must be paid for with blood, and since we don't have enough blood to purchase redemption, Jesus, whose blood is worth more than ours, gives his instead so that we can purchase our redemption. And Dracula, in order to find redemption, must always die, giving up the life force of his blood. Thus, blood is currency, even to God. Our culture functions on currency as well; it demands currency for every good. And, since both God and culture are unseen powers

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

that preside over us, they are parallel. The culture of God, which requires blood for currency, is the dark marketplace.

Our culture constantly demands of us that we produce and display more and more material goods, which, much like blood-bought redemption, tend not to serve a practical, everyday purpose. Instead of redemption, we seek luxury and approval, and this luxury and approval must be purchased with much literal currency. So our plight is much like that of Dracula. We live a wealthy lifestyle (comparatively speaking) with no visible way to support it. It becomes oppressive to us; all we know is that we must support it. We must find a way to survive and maintain our lifestyles, and we are willing to give our lives for it. We are willing to slave away and accrue many lifetimes' worth of debt in order to hold onto our aristocratic status. And in the end, there is no escape from it except through death – represented by the symbolic spilling of blood.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Chapter 3: Inbred Hicks

American culture finds a dark mirror in the form of cannibalistic inbred hicks in both *The Hills Have Eyes* movies and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* movies. Driven from the mainstream market through poverty, isolation, and exclusion, inbred hicks must form their own markets and societies, employing as currency the one commodity consistently at their disposal: human flesh. While we do not sympathize with the cannibalistic hicks in the 70s, the films of quite recently show us disturbingly that, as we plod our courses through the job market, we could at any time become a cannibalistic hick, if we are not metaphorically so already.

In the 1977 Wes Craven version of *The Hills Have Eyes*, a family is driving across the desert on vacation, take a shortcut, and fall prey to a band of depraved freaks of nature; the patriarch of this family having been born an evil monster. They survive by capturing, killing, and eating travelers who take the dreaded shortcut. At one point, the freakish family kidnaps the baby from the normal family, planning to eat it because of its extra-tender meat. They refer to the baby consistently as “the tenderloin” and save her as a special treat long enough for the father to come rescue her – even though once he accomplishes this the family is still lost in the desert with no way out. This signifies that even something as presumably sacred to us as an infant can very easily be made to be just meat.

The desert hicks in this film are not at all sympathetic, with the exception of one, who looks normal and helps the father rescue “the tenderloin.” We can only assume, however, that due to the freakish nature of the family, they would be excluded from

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

participating in the mainstream market. Therefore, they must create their own, and trade in human flesh instead of money. Babies are precious to the hicks in terms of their fleshy economic value. Just as we attach an economic value to human life in courts and in class status, the baby has an economic value in the underground market.

Babies, and even, as we see in *Taste the Blood of Dracula*, the young in general, hold a perennial soft spot in our collective psyches. Naturally, the young are our future, but this is not why we care for them in film. Indeed, we seem to care very little about the fate of “our future” in real life, as we continuously refuse to look with any sort of reverence toward the future the young will one day inhabit. After all, why worry about the eventual effects of issues such as global warming if one’s own generation will be dead by then? Why worry about debt when the younger generation can pay it off later? In fact, our culture has a highly prevalent tendency towards expecting the young to repair the problems in the world, problems which the previous generation either created or exacerbated. It passes the buck to the young, and thinks less of them for either not knowing how to repair society’s problems, or, as Roszak points out, realizing that they lack the kind of power at that stage of their lives to make any real structural changes without the help of the older generation (1-5).

So then why is it a big deal when cinema monsters victimize infants and the young? It could be that they are helpless, and that we all find ourselves helpless in this technocracy, helpless to do anything to stop the corruption which we must feed into in order to live. Even the young adults that populate horror films would fall into this category, given their relative lack of political or economic power in life off-screen.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Unconsciously, this may be a large part of why we most identify with the helpless in horror films, in the same manner as the fear of becoming a vampire minion frightens us. In a dark and scary world, we depend on whatever forces may come along to pick us up, hoping that they will care for us rather than consume us.

However, the primary reason we sympathize with the young and babies is that our own consumer culture infantilizes us until our wants and desires are those of the young and the dependent. Our consumer culture vigorously promotes the infantilization of consumers, as such commonplace products as Botox and sexually enhancing drugs evidence. The old want nothing more than to be young, and even their reading selections, including children's books such as *Harry Potter*, and their political views, which are a dogmatic black and white instead of "nuanced complexities of adult morality," reflect a childlike view of the world practically devoid of adult complication. In fact, "In the epoch in which we now live, civilization is not an ideal or an aspiration, it is a video game." (Barber 6-7). We prefer films that feature animated green monsters over politically conscious films, and unending sequels reflect a whining and childish tendency to want to hear the story over and over again (25-26).

While these are generalizations of American culture primarily intended to promote youth and increase advertising revenue, at times the drive to be young so deeply connects America with its youth that it sometimes forgets its adult responsibilities. Generally speaking, our culture is often decried as one of instant gratification. Infants rely on the same concept, demanding food, entertainment, and the like at their beck and call. While American adults may not be at the same extreme as infants, adults'

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

subconscious identification with infants is hardly a stretch when the media makes sure that all aspire to be young, and any desire is at the fingertips of any with resources to satisfy them.

What we deem “mid-life crises” compel us to purchase expensive toys such as SUVs, ATVs, plasma screen televisions, and even motorcycles which we could not afford when young. Advertisers play on this phenomenon, and consumers embrace it, some even referring to themselves as SKIers (Spending the Kids’ Inheritance) (29). In Freudian terms, this phenomenon is a form of regression executed because so many adults have difficulty adapting to adult concerns and responsibilities. Like babies, consumers do not care to understand the world around them, but only focus on the sensations constantly pouring down upon them (34). Adam Sternbergh of *New York Magazine* recently noted that average middle-aged consumers with discretionary income are often to be seen with iPods, messenger bags, expensive pre-shredded jeans, and tattered and ancient sneakers – all supposed trademarks of the young. They do this, he claims, because they are afraid to take on the traditional adult image – one which they feel will limit their passions and their recreational freedom (1-9).

However, this fantasy version of life to be found in the consumer market is not empowering, but enslaving. The consumer feels empowered by “conquering” the market and using it to suit his every whim, but in truth, the consumer is defined by brands and forced into a paradigm. This is ultimately what turns the adult consumer into an infant. The more the consumer submits to the wiles of the market, the more vulnerable that consumer becomes to its controls, thereby rendering him helpless (Barber 34-36). And

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

so, we unconsciously sympathize with infants facing imminent danger in horror films, because once we have surrendered to the market, we ourselves become the product. When we consume the products of the consumer market, the consumer market consumes our essence, or our currency.

In this way, the cannibalistic underground market once again mirrors our own. While the underground market does not turn people into babies, it either renders adults helpless like babies or creates an environment of danger for actual babies, children, and young people. Young people are the ultimate babies in a capitalist society, because while they have discretionary income, none of this income need be applied toward mortgages or children's college funds, making them the new dependent infants of capitalism. Audiences identify with young adults, as we do with babies, because most people in our culture over their twenties desire to be young people, and use large portions of their discretionary income to make others see them as such.

Here again we face an inherent contradiction in the ideology. We associate youth with autonomy, because young people have a certain amount of power in the system through their dollar votes, but they are free from responsibility. However, youth are actually victims because, being as yet unestablished in the system, they have no real power to change the world from the inside out. Also, when advertisers decide their options for them, they have no real choices in terms of consumption and the identity they hope to derive from it. Thus, autonomy and freedom, American capitalist values, are the ideals which drive the forces that ultimately enslave young consumers. This is another

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

reason why horror movie victims are necessarily young. They have enough autonomy to fight the marketplace, but not nearly enough autonomy to win.

The ending of this film is quite telling, when the final shot is the kidnapped baby's father savagely beating in a mutant's head. This transforms the consumer into a protector of innocence against the market, and, at the same time, an agent of the market. Early in his career, Wes Craven experimented with the concept of the victim becoming little different from the monster, as we can see from his first film, *Last House on the Left* (1972), when the father of a kidnapped, raped, and murdered daughter gruesomely slaughters the leader of the gang responsible with a chainsaw. Seen in this light, the father in *The Hills Have Eyes*, by perpetrating the same sorts of evils as the underground market, has become one of them. The act solidifies the bridge between the underground market and the mainstream market, leaving little left to differentiate them.

Yet, at the same time, we see this horrible transformation as a victory. We, like the family lost in an inhospitable desert with no escape and nothing to help us, find ourselves hedged in by cutthroat and bloodthirsty agents of the market seeking only to drain us of our essence and leave us without even our empty shells to give testament to our existences. While we of the mainstream market must feed in order to survive, at times we want to escape, but find that there is nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide. The frustration builds and boils over until all we want to do is smash it down and batter it in, proclaiming once and for all that we are not helpless and we are not infants. Yet even still we know that this will not provide us with escape, because in the end, we are still lost in the desert with a horde of fresh mutants hot on our trails. In the words of Wes Craven, the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

sudden realization that the American Dream, with its white picket fences and flower beds, is untrue, “gives American horror films an additional rage.” (*American Nightmare*).

Further symbolism that lends itself to a hopeless analysis is the frequent mention of the mutants’ names, which are names of Roman gods like Jupiter and Pluto. Because their names connote awesome and undisputed power, the victims are completely at the mercy of the underground market, just as we are completely at the mercy of a vast and entangled system of forever hungry merchants. Furthermore, the mutants’ names all share the names of planets, showing that even if we do not put stock in the market as a dark and mysterious god, the alignment and gravitational pull of heavenly bodies are an unchangeable status quo that we dare not challenge even if we could. Just as we dare not challenge the underground market, so we would never dare challenge our technocratic mainstream market.

Our technocracy, based on efficiency, is not up for question, because to question a society based on efficiency is to question efficiency itself, which is tantamount to irrationality and even insanity. It is a society built on the opinions of experts, sanctioned by the guiding cultural forces themselves, whose word is unquestionable. Plus, why would we dare to challenge the society that provides us with sustenance? (Roszak 8-9, 12-13). This leaves us in a final, grim situation, just as with the vampires of film: either we become part of the market and become just a brutal, or we stand up to the market and face a death of either ridicule or physical expiration, and either way the market will eventually consume our essence and add it to its own power.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The 2006 version of *The Hills Have Eyes* has the same setting and characters as the older version, but this time, the monsters are regular people turned into mutants by nuclear radiation generated from government weapons testing. They live in the desert, like the freaks of the original, because they would be scorned by normal society, and since there is no food to be found in the barren land, especially after the radiation, they must feast on the flesh of normal humans who travel through the desert. They sabotage the roads, to which the gas station attendant directs them, trapping them in the wilderness so that the mutants can prey upon them. Hence, human flesh is the only commodity available in the desert. The mutants allow the gas station attendant to live (or retain his fleshy commodities) in exchange for the flesh and blood of travelers.

This, once again, puts the mutants, as well as the gas station attendant, in the same position as the vampire minions. The gas station attendant is like the worker of the mainstream market, aiding horrid acts in order to survive. Eventually, no longer able to live with himself, and seeing no other way out, he shoots himself in the outhouse behind his gas station. We too can only find respite from our own role in the economy through self-destruction – an act most of us are understandably unwilling to undertake. The mutants themselves are challengers of the technocracy, and therefore, as Roszak would correctly argue, pariahs in the technocracy. This forces them into a dark economy where their only option is to mirror the very system which put them in that position.

Furthermore, the mutants hid from the radiation in an abandoned mine, now devoid of its previous commodities which would have been useful to mainstream society. Just as the powers overlooking the mainstream society created the mutants, the sanctuary

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

of the mainstream's commodities failed to protect them from it. Another interesting feature is a car cemetery – a pit filled with the rusted cars of countless other victims. Vehicles are an important commodity in the mainstream market, providing the backbone of all our commerce and synchronizing our system and culture, but they cannot protect us from physical or ideological assaults.

Vehicle cemeteries are common features in horror films, and, interestingly enough, Charles Manson had one outside one of his family hideouts in Death Valley, California. These were vehicles which he stole and converted into sorts of dune buggies so that he and the family could emulate Rommel, the Desert Fox (*Charles Manson: Superstar*). Vehicles, are, in a way, an extension of ourselves in a commodity-driven culture. We form strong attachments to our cars, unwilling to give them up for any reason, so much so that Americans spend a million to a million and a half dollars on new cars every month (Morgan & Company), and in 1997 there were six hundred million cars in the world, with a projected 1.2 billion by 2030 if trends continue (Elert).

There is a car for nearly every identity imaginable. There is the car for the corporate mogul, the car for the man with the mid-life crisis, the car for the suburban mother, the car for the rough-and-tumble working man, and the list goes on and on. We seek identity in our consumer products and in the brands we choose, so in a way, the destruction of these consumer products is like the destruction of ourselves. Without consumer products and brands, we must do what is practically unthinkable in our culture: forge our own identities. The death of the car represents the death of mainstream culture and its protections. Without these things, we, like the mutants, are on our own.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Interestingly, it is self-sufficiency, a major tenet of American capitalism, which is the ultimate enemy. Without consumer goods to give us the powers of transportation, communication, or self-defense, we are doomed to fight insurmountable enemies. The self-sufficiency which supposedly gives power to our system does not empower us, but leaves us helpless. The very self-sufficiency we value is what we most fear, because without our interdependency on the system itself, we lose all our power. The notion that a nation built on celebration of the individual is afraid of being solitary is horrifically ironic.

Proponents of capitalism often argue that the self-interest that drives the system is a basic part of human nature. These films would seem to uphold that ideal, because it is not long after the victims realize that they have no more protection from their culture that they become as brutal as the mutants themselves. The father in this version does more than just bash a mutant to death with a blunt object: he embarks on a bloody crusade to rescue his baby, losing some fingers and fighting his way out of a freezer filled with half-decomposed human body parts in the process.

Possibly the most interesting scene in this film is one of the final ones, where the father is battling the largest mutant in the pack, and turns to the burnt corpse of his father-in-law with an American flag impaled through his charred head, perhaps as feng shui. He yanks the flag out of his father-in-law's corpse and stabs and kills the mutant with it. By impaling the family patriarch with the American flag, the mutants are, in a sense, reclaiming American values in their own inverted fashion, planting the flag, as mainstream America often does, in the flesh of those who get in their way. However, the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

father then reclaims the American flag and uses it to destroy the mutants just as mainstream society has.

Finally, after the father has rescued his baby and skewered the biggest of the mutants with the banner of his values, it would seem that mainstream society has won. But as the remainder of the family, clutched together in a bloody group hug, celebrates relief and victory, the closing shot is of us, looking down across the vast, inhospitable desert and the small flesh-colored specks that are the family, through red-tinted binocular lenses, and we have no idea who we are. We could be more mutants watching the family and planning the next attack, or we could be the military, who laid waste to the land in the first place, coldly observing the effects of our mayhem. There is little difference, and this, ultimately, is what makes this short, final shot perhaps the most terrifying of the entire movie. But what is equally terrifying about this shot is that the tiny humans are mere specks in an unending wilderness. It makes little difference who is watching them, or even who would try to harm them; they are still trapped in the desert with no way out.

It also addresses us as spectators. All along we have been sympathizing with the victims, and in the final shot we become something else. We become ourselves – spectators. We are spectators in the movie theater, watching representatives of ourselves scurry about trying desperately to survive. But no one is really a spectator here. Everyone is the destroyer. No matter who we choose to impale with the American flag, we are still impaling someone. No matter who we are as we look through those binoculars, we are still silently watching people die, and we are still contributing to their deaths.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

And in the end, once we have become the commodity, the mainstream commodities we worked so hard for do nothing but decay in the desert. We must, however, also sympathize with the mutants, because any of us could be them. Powers over which we have no control could easily decide to reduce our way of life “to ashes,” as one mutant puts it. We ourselves could become horribly disfigured and left to dwell in a barren world where the only currency is flesh. This fear is highly relevant to our cultural consciousness, firstly because the barren world and its gruesome economy is so similar to ours, and also because the technology on which we pride ourselves is alive, strong, and has the ability to take everything away from us.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre proceeds in much the same way throughout time. The 1974 version shows us a family of psychopathic killers who, having been automated out of their jobs at the local slaughterhouse, choose instead to run a gas station/barbeque stand, and we can only assume that the barbeque they sell is human barbeque. Since the hicks seem to rely on the gas station/barbeque for their livelihood, and the owner had no gas to sell to the young victims (this *was* the seventies, after all), the barbeque stand is essential to their survival. While this topic is not explored until the advent of the litany of mediocre sequels, and it appears that the hicks do nothing else for a living, there is sufficient evidence to assume that the barbeque is their only or main form of income. We are not entirely, or at all, sympathetic with the hicks, though, because they never explicitly state their motives, and they have the inexplicable habit of desecrating graves and leaving gooey corpses (of which Tobe Hooper is incredibly fond) displayed out in the sun.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Still, the implication is that, in mainstream society, the family's labor is used as any commodity in the marketplace, and the marketplace has simply found a commodity more valuable than gas, because human flesh, unlike gas in the seventies and even today, is always in plentiful supply. Therefore, they are doomed to poverty and must make a living any way they can. In order to do this, they must deal in another commodity besides their labor. Since they have none readily at their disposal, they must take commodities from other people. They choose the flesh as this commodity. This particular commodity has the added benefit of giving them a certain independence from the marketplace, as even if customers stopped frequenting the barbeque stand, they could still consume the product themselves.

By subsisting on human flesh instead of societal currency, the family members accomplish two objectives: 1. Satisfying their natural psychopathic tendencies (being inbred hicks and all), and 2. Obtaining a commodity which will free them from fluctuations in the market. Since they cannot eradicate the entire human race, human flesh is guaranteed to be constantly available. In this way, we can partially sympathize with the family. They are psychopaths, and there may not be sufficient reasoning for us to conclude that eating human flesh is an absolute necessity, but they personify our own frustrations with the instability of the mainstream market. At any time we may be automated out of jobs, and we are constantly running the rat race to obtain our share of scarce resources. We, like the hicks, need an escape from this pressure.

Furthermore, this mainstream society seems just as cold and unfeeling as the mainstream society of *The Hills Have Eyes* remake. The mainstream society seems not

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

even to notice any disappearances of people whose flesh may have contributed to the barbeque, and investigations of the grave desecrations seem cursory and half-hearted, as if it is one of those issues that appears in newspapers and tabloids for a few weeks and then evaporates. Mainstream society cares even less for the family and the loss of their jobs.

The beginning shots of the film are also reminiscent of the original *Hills Have Eyes*, when, during the opening credits, we see solar flares from the sun along with news reports on the evil goings-on of the world. It is as if the natural order of the cosmos is that fear and violence reign on the earth, and challenging it is out of the question. The first scene of the teenagers in the van features one of the young victims reading aloud a book on astrology. She expounds the alignment of the stars and how it affects our personalities and our fates, to the light ridicule of her companions. Interestingly, even though the teenagers are skeptical about our fates being set, all of them still fall into the cannibalistic family's snare.

Yet, it is not the family that ultimately builds and sets this trap, but mainstream society itself. Had the family not been automated out of their jobs, we can only speculate that perhaps, given the opportunity, they might have sought an honest living instead. There is also the issue of no gas at the gas station. Economic factors of mainstream society created this period's gas shortage, and even such a simple and small detail as that lends greatly to the overall situation. The gas station could also have served as a form of honest living for the family, and the only reason the teenagers are stuck in this madmen-infested wasteland is that there was no gas at the pump. This represents the failure of

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

mainstream society to protect its members from evil, and continues to underscore the idea that self-sufficiency apart from the system is our real enemy.

It is telling that in both *Hills Have Eyes* movies and in the original *TCM*, the gas station is either unable to help the travelers or it contributes to the evil that annihilates them. In this way, the gas station is not only a representative of mainstream society, but a portal between the mainstream and the underground. It is, after all, not the ultimate symbol of the mainstream economy, but a small messenger bearing its values. The fact that this value-bearing messenger can be an agent of either the underground or the mainstream shows us that both worlds operate through similar, if not identical, media. The mainstream effectively makes use of the gas station because it carries the commodity which fuels it; the underground economy can make use of the gas station when it has failed to carry the commodity which fuels the mainstream. The gas station is thus the carrier of both societies' most prized commodity, holding or delivering gasoline, or holding or delivering human flesh. This is a grim symbolic parallel between the two societies, showing that the two can and do cross over through even the most mundane and everyday of portals.

The 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, on the other hand, presents a much darker world. There is no seemingly thriving mainstream society which the hicks have simply rejected; they are truly isolated from the rest of the world. Their underground market society does not merely consist of a single family, but a small network of other hicks in the area. Children have a certain economic value in this film, as well as in *The Hills Have Eyes*, but they have this value not because they are good eating,

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

but because they are the future of the market. This film also shares a car cemetery with *The Hills Have Eyes*, again symbolizing mainstream commodities cast aside in the underground market.

In this version, the hick society steals babies from the mainstream families that happen to be unlucky enough to cross their paths. Not only do they steal the babies, but they raise these babies as if they were their own. It is as if the hicks are reclaiming, or even rescuing, these babies from the corruptions of the mainstream market – corruptions that will begin marketing to them the second they can open their eyes, entice away their essences at every stage of their development, and eventually re-infantilize them once they grow up. While the family does not necessarily offer these babies the ideal alternative to their role in the mainstream culture, they do offer the babies something that mainstream culture might deny them: the chance to be consumers rather than the consumed.

In the mainstream economy, these normal children passing through deserted Texas in cars that are far from luxury (at least as far as we can judge from this version's car cemetery) would have little chance of rising to the capitalist class. But in this dark world where flesh is the currency of the realm, they have a solid guarantee of growing up to be in charge of the production and the consumption of the economy's goods. Furthermore, the dark society's family values are little different from mainstream family values. The hicks allow their adopted children to run around unsupervised through the countryside, but vehemently claim them as their own, almost as if they were property. We do the same thing in mainstream culture, as we are often too busy bringing in currency to bother with the children, and there is little (or in the dark society's case, no)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

daycare options for them. Still, we insist that these children are not really their own people, but blank easels onto which we can paint our own picture of reality. Given our constant and fervent calls for better family values in the nation, it is ironic that this dark society's family values operate on the same concepts as our own.

The family's poverty and isolation take center stage in this rendition, unlike the original, where they are mostly implied. We know that the mainstream rejects them, as the family matriarch admonishes the female hero for being just like the mainstream market members who systematically tormented Leatherface. Their motivations for eating human flesh is much like those in the original, but not so much simply because they are psychopaths. While there is no doubt that they are freakish inbred hicks, their isolation strongly suggests that they may not know any better. Therefore, they consume human flesh for subsistence.

We can see their parallel to the mainstream market especially when, in the final scenes, Leatherface chases the female hero into the slaughterhouse. The slaughterhouse is hardly abandoned, as it stores fresh carcasses and working equipment, but there is no real labor force in this setting, and the nature of its existence is a mystery. It stands symbolic of the production forces necessary to the hicks' livelihood: meat. Leatherface wishes to slaughter the protagonist in the temple of systematic slaughter, which is a feature of both the mainstream market and this underground market. Here the inbred hicks are sympathetic characters because they take control of their own market, having an independence from the often malevolent mainstream forces beyond anyone but a handful of people's control.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006), a prequel to the remake, recreates the hicks as even more sympathetic than the remake. Here the mainstream market does not simply use the hicks as commodities, but creates them. Leatherface himself is born on the assembly line in the slaughterhouse; he is a creation of the market. Leatherface naturally goes on to show loyalty to this market that created him, but the market betrays him when the slaughterhouse closes after being condemned. It is this that sets Leatherface on his killing spree, when he murders the owner of the slaughterhouse in anger. The closing of the slaughterhouse also directly sets the family on its systematic slaughter of travelers, as the town vacates when there are no more jobs. Since this provincial life is the only one known to the family, they decide to stay and create their own local marketplace using the only resource at hand: plain, simple, readily available human flesh.

We also learn that the family patriarch, whose idea it was to create this new market, discovered the possibilities of human pot roast as a POW in Korea. Hence, it was the mainstream society's army which put him in the position to come to view human flesh as an essential commodity. The army and the police are the enforcers of the mainstream market. Our patriarch learned the basics of his new underground market while enforcing the values of the mainstream market in other parts of the world, and his first action as leader of the underground market is to take the place of enforcer in the town. Therefore, when consuming a human being, the victim's power is transferred onto the consumer, making human flesh an even more desirable commodity.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The family's separation from mainstream society is clearly an evil in these films. Because they have removed themselves from the mainstream and the outward conventions of the mainstream, they deviate from mainstream values. However, they are not actually deviating from mainstream values because, by striking out on their own, they are embracing self-sufficiency and individualism in ways the mainstream society would never dare. Furthermore, they are enterprising, entering the barren wilderness with nothing but hard work, determination, and good old-fashioned ingenuity. They are fulfilling the American Dream at the same time as they are attacking and subverting it.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Conclusion – Part 1

Over time, we must come to sympathize with cannibalistic monsters because they reflect our own desires. These films have a dual fright factor, firstly in the fact that people who look like us are the victims, and secondly in the idea that the cannibals embody our own secret desires – we want to be them, but cannot admit it. Since the 1960s, films have progressively increased, sometimes subtly and sometimes rocking back and forth, toward this dual fear. We are simultaneously afraid of being eaten, and of eating, but our identities rest on this very model. Accordingly, even our identities are subject to the wiles of the market.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Part 2: Identity

Chapter 1: The Flesh

Fleshy identity is most apparent in Frankenstein movies, because evil manifests itself in flesh. Whether we are good or evil depends on what sort of flesh we inhabit. This particular example has remained consistent throughout the century. In the 1931 version, Frankenstein accidentally gives the creature a brain marked “abnormal,” and in the 1994 version, the creature has a noble brain, but a diseased, criminal body. Thus, “The two film versions suggest that good and evil have a physical basis in the body, whereas Mary Shelley’s book adopts an altogether social view of the Creature’s evil.” (Freeland 46). This story’s particular progression into film creates a new image of evil – one made of the same materials as typical people. When the identity is flesh, any supernatural hope for a brighter identity for humanity no longer has basis, and the basic building blocks of the average human being become the same building blocks for evil.

However, there is at least a suggestion of societal forces at work in the creature’s turn toward evil, when Frankenstein’s assistant beats the creature and torments him with a lit torch. Also, Frankenstein chains the creature to a dank stone wall in a dungeon-like room in a dark and foreboding tower. Frankenstein gives little thought to what sort of psychological affect this might have on a living being just come into existence. Also, when the creature first kills the little girl playing by the river, he appears to not intend her demise; he wants to play too. The creature does not really start to turn evil until it is apparent that everyone hates him.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Yet we must wonder in what way the abnormal brain was abnormal. Was its abnormality what made the creature so childlike and impressionable that he was willing to destroy people for the sake of a misunderstanding? Or was the brain abnormal because it gave him truly evil tendencies? This is the ambiguous portion of the film, and we are still left with questions regarding the nature of evil. It seems to be a cross between society and physicality, or nature and nurture.

The most interesting part of the societal factors, though, is that they remain largely unseen. Frankenstein makes far more fuss over the implantation of the abnormal brain than he does over the little bit he sees of his assistant beating the creature. In fact, Frankenstein hardly knows that his assistant has been tormenting the creature, and he assumes that the creature will not mind the dungeon-like accommodations simply because he is not quite human. Thus, the social factors go unnoticed even when they are the one factor in the creature's life that can be changed. This makes social forces the most prominent in some sense, as their invisibility makes them more dangerous. However, the creature's basic nature is in his physicality, which is essentially evil.

The duality of the creature's identity in terms of nature and nurture is interesting when compared to our own questions about who we are. It would seem that this version would argue that identity is natural and changeable only in the sense that small environmental triggers can bring out qualities with which we are born. After all, how can we expect someone with an abnormal brain to become a contributing member of society? Still, the creature is sympathetic and not entirely to blame for his identity. This leads us to

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

a more metaphysical parallel to our own lives, where Frankenstein is God and his assistant, Fritz, is Satan.

In order to prove his greatness, Frankenstein creates life, much like the God of our culture is believed to have created us. But then something goes wrong in the laboratory of creation. A helper of the creator, privy to all of the creator's doings, makes a mistake, through which the new little creatures naively do something evil, rendering the created life ruined, at which point the helper sets out to torment the new created life. This sounds awfully familiar, albeit somewhat chronologically out of place and not quite a perfect parallel. As the basic story behind our cultural values, the Biblical parallel leads us to identify with the plotline. However, the parallel's imperfections are telling, because while Adam and Eve were partially to blame for humanity's fall into evil, it is not the creature's fault that he is evil. The notion that our evil natures may not be our fault is appealing, because we are so far removed in time from the original Garden of Eden story that we may have difficulty understanding why we should be held responsible for the actions of other people many years ago. Also, the average person is not directly responsible for the evils of the world, just like the creature is not responsible for his own evil nature. It is as if, both physically and metaphysically, we are destined to do evil. If we stand in for the creature, then it is we who have an abnormal brain, and therefore we have diseased identities.

Even if we see Fritz as the instigator of evil via social stimuli, he is not the most normal of characters either. He too seems to possess an abnormal brain, walking hunched over and with a shrill voice reminiscent of the mentally ill. It would seem that Fritz is

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

physically disabled such that he cannot entirely control his evil actions. Evil is something embedded in the flesh of the individual, and has little or nothing to do with society as a whole. This makes the society itself invisible, thus, in Roszak's terms, giving it its power. If we believe that we are to blame for evil, then we will not turn our attention onto the society that plays a large role in creating it. Roszak also argues that the power of a technocratic society also rests upon the authority of state-sanctioned experts whose word is unquestionable (10-11). In this film, Frankenstein is the expert, and it is not his handiwork that is the problem, but the mistakes of an underling and the resulting physical imperfections. Frankenstein delegates responsibility just as any expert would in a top-down system, but it is not the system that the film blames, but the individual's inherent imperfection.

In a sense, the imperfect creatures are co-opted into not questioning the system or the expert, but their own faults and follies. They have little use beyond serving their technocratic master, and when they fail to do so, they must be destroyed. Here, as in the cannibal movies, flesh is still the greatest commodity, but not of any underground society, but mainstream society. There is no consumption of flesh in the Frankenstein films, however; flesh is produced even though no one is going to consume it. Our culture is notorious for producing far more than its citizens could ever consume, or for producing items that its citizens might not need or even want to consume. Yet the driving force of our economy is to continue producing. Interestingly enough, the Great Depression was busy laying waste to American production during the time this film appeared.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

This was a time fraught with economic problems, where the people could not consume, if they could even produce, the commodities they needed for mere subsistence, let alone produce or consume something as valuable to us as human flesh. Doing so reflected the consumers' need for power over their own economy, but this film teaches us that we cannot take charge of it on our own. While the experts have the capacity to increase our production, they blame the common grunt when it does not succeed. The average person is powerless, but mainstream society still holds him responsible for its own failings. Our own natures doom us to productive failure. Those who argue that capitalism is in our basic individual natures would say that, naturally speaking, the reason such a natural system would fail must be a flaw in our individual natures. We can only fail at a natural system of production if there is something inherently wrong with us. It cannot possibly be the system itself, they claim.

We must wonder if it would have been possible for the creature to escape his essential nature. The film does not explore this question in any depth, although the 1957 version, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, spends more time on the topic of the nature of physicality. Frankenstein, on a quest to create the perfect human being, starts with the hanged body of a criminal who was terrorizing the countryside. Frankenstein believes that all materials are fair game, and that they hold no nature. Frankenstein does not stop with this body, though, as he goes on to sever and steal the hands of a famous sculptor who has recently died. As he prepares to transplant the hands onto the body, he remarks that with hands like the criminal's, he could not have grown up to be anything but a thief.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The creature's hands are the body part of most interest in this version, as if they represent the deeds the owner is capable of doing.

Frankenstein also considers the brain to be paramount, and steals the brain of a renowned professor whom he kills by throwing off a balcony. However, this particular film is primarily an exploration of Frankenstein's evil – the creature's evil is only secondary. Frankenstein himself has impregnated his maid while engaged to his cousin Elizabeth and then given the maid over to the creature when she threatened to tell Elizabeth if he did not marry her. Frankenstein's character is cold throughout the movie, and the creature has no real personality. The creature resembles a zombie more than anything else, and in some ways seems to preclude *Night of the Living Dead* when the creature kills an old man in a cemetery at dusk among the autumn leaves. The creature unthinkingly kills everyone who comes near him; he is the immoral product of an immoral man.

Again we see the hands motif when the creature attempts to strangle Frankenstein with the very sculptor's hands that the good doctor so admired. Frankenstein created the creature with the cold, meticulous, unfeeling hands of a cold, meticulous, unfeeling scientist, and so the creature himself treats all people as though they were disposable meat. As a creation, he is, in a sense, made in the image and likeness of his creator. His nature is a mixture between the brutality of the criminal and the cold spirit of his creator's science. Society has nothing whatsoever to do with this nature; all the evil is physical.

Once again, Frankenstein is the producer of capital. His coldness in this film is telling, as even as a small boy, after his parents have died; he is the picture of poise and

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

lack of feeling. He is arrogant, elitist, and most concerned with keeping up a good appearance and proving his own power. He is cold and efficient, taking raw materials at face value and using them in what he deems the most efficient ways. He is a capitalist machine, blaming everyone but himself for his experimental failures. When Frankenstein's tutor shoots the creature when it threatens a small child, Frankenstein is only concerned with the damage done to his property. Because the physical nature of the creature is ambiguous, and no societal happenings turn it into evil, the only other variable is the creature's creator himself.

The creature in this film is something of a precursor to the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead*, because it is purely a being of impulse. We never know what it is that the creature actually wants; it is an unspeaking, uncomprehending force of violence. Any human being, whether innocent or not, is in danger when left alone with the creature. It is merely a physical presence, an animal. It is not so much that man cannot replicate the work of God or nature, as Frankenstein films are often interpreted, but that scientific production cannot replicate the human psyche. Artificiality is not an acceptable substitute, like Splenda for sugar. Artificiality is doomed to failure when made to improve upon the genuine article.

It is also interesting to note that Frankenstein is a respected scientist in his field. He is a technocratic expert with an impregnable façade of respectability and legitimacy. This calls into question how much we should really unflinchingly trust those whom society grants authority, and how much we should trust the reliability of their artificial products. What makes the film ultimately frightening is that we have no idea if people

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

like Frankenstein are the ones we are trusting. What if we are heeding the words of characterless people who may eventually unleash destruction upon us out of their greed and megalomania? The truth is that we don't know, and it is entirely possible. The idea that we have trusted our livelihoods and ideologies to a group of people who may be evil is truly the stuff of nightmares.

However, the film ends on a note both disturbing and hopeful. Finally, after the creature burns in a fire and no evidence remains of its existence, the authorities arrest Frankenstein for the murder of the creature's victims. Frankenstein's tutor, Paul, and fiancée, Elizabeth, say nothing of the truth to the guards, and the closing shot is of a guillotine blade rising in the light of the setting sun. In this final scene, Frankenstein's cold rationality breaks down as he pleads for mercy. His cries are pathetic and difficult to not sympathize with, but the final justice needs this irony. The cold, rational, merciless man meets his death at the hands of the same cold, rational, and merciless system that granted him his authority. While the irony is satisfying, it is still disturbing, because this system still exists, and is still meting out justice to its citizens and still granting legitimacy to men like Frankenstein. The system of the real world is similar, because it is just as cold and meticulous and also grants legitimacy to evil when evil has money and an established name. However, in a way, our culture is even more frightening, because our system likely would have punished Frankenstein with a sentence in a minimum security, white collar prison where he could play tennis and plot his next twisted experiment.

Almost forty years later, Kenneth Branagh presents the nature of the creature's evil in yet another light in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Here, the creature has a physical

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

nature that contributes to his evil, but it ultimately means something far greater. The creature is the physical incarnation of our fears. The issue in this film is not a matter of overstepping divine or physical bounds, but of destroying and mutilating life in an effort to make it last forever.

Physically, the creature is composed of the brain of Dr. Waldman, Frankenstein's brilliant and conscientious mentor, the body of a deranged criminal hanged for killing Dr. Waldman, and the leg of a dead cholera patient. This creates a certain duality in the creature's nature. The criminal was violent and ignorant, killing Waldman for attempting to vaccinate him, and Waldman himself was brilliant, but complicated in his moral alignment. He first pioneered the concept of raising the dead through medical and electrical means, and routinely defied the status quo. However, Waldman insisted that the reanimation experiments be abandoned, but not before showing Frankenstein the basic secrets behind his past research. The creature himself sums it up later in the film when he tells Frankenstein that he is capable of either great love or great rage.

Therefore, we can surmise that the duality of the creature's nature rests specifically in his flesh. The only remaining variable is society, which repeatedly fails him, culminating in Frankenstein's refusal to help him or to atone for his mistake. Society itself is clearly evil, uncontrollable, and under mob rule, as an angry mob drives the creature away from Ingolstadt, believing he has plague, and another angry mob hangs an innocent woman for the death of Frankenstein's younger brother. We see a smaller version of this as well, when the father of the family the creature has chosen to secretly adopt, believing the creature is attacking the grandfather, violently drives him out of the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

house. This is a society built on anger and self-interest. As the father of the family himself says, nothing “comes free of cost.”

Capitalist America is supposedly a system of the people, where ordinary people have the opportunity to make of themselves whatever they wish. However, the people making up the system in this film have no desire to rise above their situation, and all are the same. They rule in an unwieldy, unthinking mob that constantly subverts the cold and rational, but failing, efforts of the aristocracy. In this way, the mob represents the capitalist system at the same time as it subverts it. Since the mob shows no individuality whatsoever, and each member carries no individual distinction, it does not represent the individualistic values of capitalism. However, because the mob is willing to violently eliminate any who so much as appear to threaten their own interests, they represent as a whole the unflinching destructive forces of capitalism. This, the film would suggest, is rule by the people at its best in our culture.

A subplot of this film is the journey of Robert Walton, who is attempting to sail across the Arctic Sea to the North Pole. Walton is so willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish his goal that, when asked how many lives it will cost, he says, “As many as it takes.” He further rationalizes this to a repentant Frankenstein he meets en route to the North Pole: “Lives come and go. If we succeed, our names will live on forever.” Thus, the primary fear of this society is of being forgotten, which constitutes a death of one’s name and memory. When the physical body dies, our chances to make history remember us through our honor and glory are finished. Death is the end of our ultimate quest to be loved and remembered.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Frankenstein fears death because at the beginning of the film, he faces the gruesome and bloody death of his mother as she bears his younger brother. He makes it perfectly clear that he wants nothing more than to conquer this enemy, which he perceives as actively creating suffering for human beings. Robert Walton shares this desire, and is willing to sacrifice everyone else's life but his own for this purpose. The angry mobs fear death with force, first attacking the creature because they fear that he will infect them with a deadly plague, and then attacking the young woman they believe killed little William Frankenstein, partially because they are outraged at the taking of life, and partially because they fear she will later attack others and continue to steal life.

No matter what station in life any of the characters are, from the ignorant, cholera-infested mobs living with terrible sanitation to the wealthy and aristocratic Frankensteins, everyone considers life their most valuable asset. Life represents the greatest asset imaginable. Here the prime capital is not money or meat, but life itself, and the people compete for it as if it were, indeed, capital. People are willing to do awful things for such assets just as they are willing to do awful things to preserve life – the ultimate property. Life is the ultimate capital because without it, we can have no other, and unlike many other forms of capital, life has an expiration date.

What simultaneously makes life both more and less valuable, according to the films and myself, is the fact that it all resides solely in flesh, and not in soul. This makes it somewhat less valuable in a certain way because it eliminates the eternal and metaphysical value of life in the form of the soul. However, it also makes life infinitely more valuable because we are not guaranteed eternal life, and, like any meat, it can

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

eventually spoil and no longer be useful. This makes preserving it urgent, because once it is gone, it can never again be restored.

This appears to be a fairly recent development, since the fear of death is not as emphasized as one of Frankenstein's motives. He acts primarily for personal glory, and not so much in the name of conquering death, even though it is apparent that the creature's evil is at least partially attributable to his physicality, which removes emphasis on soul and any metaphysical human nature. However, the fact that it is the brain and not the body of the creature that is diseased points partially to a leaning toward metaphysics. His evil nature is in his mind, which is a somewhat loftier concept than bodily meat.

The shift toward a bodily nature manifests itself in *Curse of Frankenstein*, where the creature's brain is that of a smart and likeable old man. Here the brain is irrelevant; it is the body which is important to our natures. And now that we understand the finality of death, we must fight fiercely to preserve it, even doing evil things if necessary.

Frankenstein in Branagh's version is still the producing capitalist, even though he produces for somewhat more altruistic reasons than the other versions. His failure to conquer death, and, in fact, his success in making the problem worse, shows us that no amount of production can destroy our fears. The more we try to make life better for ourselves through the artificial production of substitutes, the more we create a dangerous and artificial world that only breeds more destruction.

The shift towards a physical nature of evil took a definite turn with *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). The patriarch of this cannibalistic family was born with an evil physicality, which is offered as the only explanation for his behavior. Even as an infant,

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

he was enormous, and came out sideways, almost tearing his mother apart. He went on to grow body hair and become quite large even as a small boy, and tortured animals in his spare time. His later progeny resemble him genetically, growing to abnormal heights and feasting on human flesh. They are embodied, physical evil. They, like Frankenstein, are physical incarnations of our fears.

We fear not only death, but the complete obliteration that comes with the destruction of our flesh. As we've seen, the flesh itself, like the life it holds, is capital for which we must compete. The most frightening part of *The Hills Have Eyes* is the victims' utter hopelessness and inability to defend their capital, which is the same horror of the scientist attempting to conquer death. The interesting part of *The Hills Have Eyes*, though, is that no one deliberately set out to produce such flesh. The monster's parents were only attempting to create life in the natural way, without any grandiose dreams of conquering fear or death. His parents were average, working people with no known history of evil.

The horror of this situation is that any of us, any of the average, working members of the technocratic society, can give birth to a monster. This monster does not simply represent abnormal human babies, but consumerism itself. The monster violently consumes human life itself, with no regard for emotion or pain inflicted upon others. This film came out just a year before Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, when consumers enjoyed an economic boom and a carefree lifestyle of consumption (*The American Nightmare*). While *Dawn of the Dead* explores the nightmare of flesh-eating monsters lurking outside our spheres of well-furnished domestic tranquility, *The Hills Have Eyes* explores a

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

nightmare that strikes even closer to home. What if we, through our decadent lives of carefree consumption, one day have to pay the piper?

Perhaps the lifestyle we take to be harmless fun is actually breeding a monster of greed and consumerism that will only want more, until finally only the consumption of human life can slate its unquenchable lust to consume. While the advertising companies eventually turn the consumers into the consumed by redefining our identities to match a brand label, we do not really see the advertising companies as a part of us. But in a way, they are our creation. Without our desire for more, there would be no money in advertising or in producing brand labels in the first place.

In this way, we are the parents of the advertising companies, which then turn back around to infantilize us and then recreate us. In other words, we give birth to consumerism, which then consumes us. This is exactly what happens with this monster and his parents. The parents, being well-meaning, average people, had only the best intentions in their creation, and did not expect it to turn evil and morph into a force beyond their control. We the consumers also feel this helplessness and fear. Credit cards, once a convenient way to purchase items without carrying cash and filling out checks soon became a debt nightmare, with an average of over a hundred thousand bankruptcies filed in the U.S. every month in 2004 (U.S. Bankruptcy Court).

Despite our good intentions, our willingness to work hard, and our hopes of living a peaceful life with a peaceful family, we, the consumers, have created a monster. Like the hapless vampire minions, we see once again that even good people can create evil. In this culture, even simply living out our lives, seeking happiness and betterment,

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

following “The American Dream,” can create or contribute to evil, leaving us with a responsibility we do not wish to face. The monster of *The Hills Have Eyes* is the creation of every consumer in the market, and it is one that will eventually destroy and consume not just us as individuals, but others as well until it becomes so rooted in our culture, as inescapable to us as the film’s desert, that nothing can destroy it.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) further encapsulates the physical nature of evil. Gunnar Hansen, who played the original Leatherface, studied for the part by imitating the mentally disabled, understanding that Leatherface is not much more than “a physical presence” (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: A Family Portrait Revisited*). In many ways, Leatherface does indeed resemble someone with limited capacities beyond the physical. He does not have a single speaking line, and communicates his emotions through wails, pig-like squeals, and various masks. His role in the family is that of a large child, or even a regressive model of woman, despite his superman-like strength and phallic chainsaw. In still other ways, he is more machine than man, dutifully carrying out his assigned tasks.

Still, Leatherface does not quite resemble any of the other flesh-based characters because he seems to have come into life through some sort of osmosis. No evil scientist created him, and he has no mother, and none is mentioned. He was not created; he simply is. He is the stark, immovable evil that inhabits the earth and cannot be vanquished. He takes orders only from his father, which he does out of fear, even though he could easily destroy his father if he only had the will. Ultimately, what makes Leatherface evil and diminishes his evil at the same time is his physical nature. His physicality is what lends

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

him his strength to do evil deeds, and it is his lack of capacity for critical thought that keeps him from pondering his motivations and recoiling. However, it is also this presumably physical lack of mental capacity that keeps him from understanding that he does not have to take orders from his psychopathic father. In some ways, he does not understand his own strength, and that is what makes him susceptible to evil influences.

In this same way, we are also susceptible to evil influences. Because we do not understand our own power as workers and as consumers, we do not realize that we do not have to take the orders of a psychopathic system, and so we continue to contribute to a decadent consumerist culture that enslaves our identities. We wield the strength and the chainsaw, but we use it for the purposes of evil without realizing it.

Not only do we wield the chainsaw for the good of a dark society, though, but we also wield it in the name of our own survival. Just like Leatherface, we would be unable to find productive work to sustain ourselves without the system, and so for that reason as well we must continue taking its orders. This is somewhat more frightening than the monster of *The Hills Have Eyes*, because we are not giving birth to the evil; we are the evil. This perspective takes on a more complicated dimension when we consider that the victims still resemble us. They are young – the same age as every person in our culture is trained to want to be, and it is not some mystical “Other” that Leatherface destroys, but the very people on screen representing us. We are simultaneously the destroyer and the destroyed, because by contributing to a destructive society, we are also destroying ourselves.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Other characters besides Leatherface are also defined by their physicality in this film. One of them is Leatherface's brother, Edwin Neal, who played this character, imitated the mannerisms of his paranoid schizophrenic nephew for the part (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre: A Family Portrait Revisited*). Schizophrenia, while situated in the mind, is, like many other mental disorders, linked to chemical imbalances in the brain, making it a physical illness. Another interesting feature of his is that he does not seem to mind cutting into his own flesh. It is intriguing that he treats with such disregard the one commodity that drives his underground economy. However, it is often easy to take for granted what is readily available. We characteristically have the same attitude toward oil and automobiles. From our perspective, these things are in constant and ready supply, even though the facts tell us that obtaining them can be a struggle now, and definitely will be in the future.

The final character with a limited physicality is not one of the monsters, but one of the victims, Franklin. Franklin is overweight, wheelchair-bound, and by far the most annoying character in the entire film. He is whiney, spoiled, and completely dependent on the others, who only take care of him out of a sense of obligation. We may cheer for the other youths, who are meant to resemble us, but no one is rooting for Franklin. Franklin represents the obligations that weigh us down, like children or mortgage payments. In one scene, where Leatherface chases Sally, the main protagonist, through the woods, Franklin loads her down, his wheelchair uncooperative on the unpaved ground. Although Leatherface makes short work of Franklin, which allows Sally to flee unrestrained, we

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

get the sense that perhaps she would have stood a better chance of escaping had she not been burdened with such a responsibility.

A current trend among many adults is the idea that children rob them of youthful freedom, leading to the rise of child-free zones for adult fun, which we can define as:

environments that bar kids from grown-up settings in order to allow adults to ‘be themselves’ and hence to be free...free to be brats, it would seem – to conduct themselves without the usual grown-up concerns for and responsibilities toward children, hence to be just like children (Barber 28).

Market-infantilized adults know that, as soon as kids come along, so does responsibility. It is this responsibility which keeps them from enjoying the freedom of choice that they enjoyed when they were young and unattached. As soon as they have dependents to look after, they are more susceptible to a sort of destruction or entrapment which robs them of their adult autonomy and creates in them a need for others to fulfill their wishes and a desire to pay to have their responsibilities disappear.

Another way to see Franklin is as a representative of the mainstream market. He is an adult, but behaves as though he were a child, just as advertising companies encourage adults in our economy to do in order to pull in more recreational revenue. Perhaps mainstream society weighs down the victims and makes them vulnerable to destruction when there is no forthcoming help. Yet in either case we cannot simply dump Franklin as we race through the woods, because to do so would be to shirk our responsibilities. We are inextricably tied to the cares of the mainstream society, and that is what leaves us open to attack when we are isolated from the protections that come with

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

that society. We cannot leave behind our culture, nor can we simply choose to leave behind our children or our mortgage payments. The result is a vicious cycle. Our responsibilities and our culture depend on us for their survival, but by helping them, we endanger our own.

The 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* explores some of these same concepts in different ways. Leatherface is still uncommunicative and approximately the size of a small tank. However, he seems less afraid of his father. He is less fearful and more obedient. It would seem that his development is somehow stunted, but he is far more cunning than he is in the original. He is less a purely physical force and more like a hunter. He is methodical in his butchering work, and strategic in his hunt. Furthermore, he has a real name in this version, which his parents shorten to Tommy. He also has a mother and only emits odd squeals when he's hurt.

This makes Leatherface, or Tommy, even more of a force to be reckoned with. He is capable of operating with or without outside leadership. Since he is so autonomous, and because he consumes our very essences, he is, like Frankenstein's monster, the physical incarnation of our fears. However, like the original, Leatherface is not the creation of a mad scientist, and it is unclear whether his parents raised him with the definitive purpose of making him an agent of evil at their disposal. Interestingly, though, he is far more human than his original version, since he has both a father and a mother, and an actual name.

These features remove much of Leatherface's otherness and place him squarely within the human race. He is not so much a monster anymore as he is a human being

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

gone awry. The other members of the underground society treat him as if he were one of their children, referring to him as a “poor, sweet boy,” and expressing heartfelt sympathy for him, because it turns out that in this version, Leatherface has a skin disease which scarred and disfigured his face. We even get a glimpse of him without a mask, and it is not a pretty sight. Leatherface is one of us, and is only different from us because of his background and his unfortunate physical disfigurement.

Some similarities between the different Leatherfaces still remain, though, particularly in his infantile personality in both versions. The effect of this feature is also the same in both films: he is the infantilizing effect of mass consumer culture as well as the infantilized version of ourselves created by this culture. However, he more closely resembles us rather than the market itself in this version, simply because of his additional humanity. Once we, like Leatherface, become infantilized, all we really care about is consumption, and we will go to any lengths to do so. Leatherface is the consumer, and he still operates exclusively on orders from the family patriarch. Whether he does it out of fear or out of loyalty is unclear, though.

All we can tell is that he is suited only for this sort of life. He would hardly be able to function in populated mainstream society, being a purely physical presence and a hunter and butcher by nature. Just as he could not survive in our world, we cannot survive in his, and Leatherface proves this time and again as he slaughters his young victims one at a time. Just like Leatherface, we would not know how to survive in any other world. Our culture, however destructive it might be to people living outside of it, is the only way we can find sustenance. Thus, Leatherface’s physical nature necessitates his identity in

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

this dark society. It is not so much that his physical nature means that he is inherently evil – only that his physical nature means he is incapable of living any other way. Just as capitalism is supposedly in our very natures, so this dark economy resides in Leatherface's basic nature. Therefore, if we subscribe to the notion that our way of life is the only natural way, then we must sympathize with Leatherface, because his identity, like the way we perceive ours, rests entirely in his nature at the most basic level. His nature is to violently consume, just as we claim that ours is.

Lastly, his degenerative skin disease is reminiscent of our own culture's inherent decadence. Just as this disease lays waste to Leatherface's flesh, so we lay waste to our own natural environment, producing an average of approximately 730,000 tons of hazardous waste per year between 1997 and 2005, and about 4.5 pounds of municipal solid waste per day from 2002-2006 (South Carolina Indicators Project). The tendency toward waste is inherent in Leatherface's physicality, but our wasteful identities are worse, because we choose to be wasteful. Furthermore, because waste is in our actions and identities as well as Leatherface's, his identity continues to mirror our own. If this sort of waste is in our basic natures, as the skin disease is in Leatherface's basic physical nature, then we once again find ourselves parallel to this enduring horror movie monster. Our natures lay waste to us, so we in turn lay waste to others in order to survive.

The end result is an essential conflict between efficiency and waste. Waste fuels our efficiency because our efficiency lies in consumption alone rather than in the perpetuation of resources. While we consume in highly efficient ways, the waste inherent in our constant drive to consume cancels out the very efficiency of which it is a product.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

With such waste, a society cannot be truly efficient. This is true of both the cannibals and the mainstream market, because both waste the resources essential to their economy in the name of that economy's efficiency. We waste oil and plastics, for example, while the cannibals waste the very human life that essentially drives their marketplace.

This film's prequel, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006), takes an even more interesting spin on Leatherface's physical nature. In this rendition, Leatherface is born on the assembly line of the meat packing plant. His biological mother, a nameless, ordinary worker, suddenly gives birth while packing meat on the line. She writhes screaming on the floor, the boss looking on unsympathetically, only seeing her as an oddity, until her screams cease as suddenly as they started and a misshapen baby emerges in a steaming pool of blood. In the next scene, we see a scrawny, starved-looking woman digging through dumpsters for morsels of food, who finds the baby, wrapped in butcher paper, lying in the garbage.

She takes little Leatherface home with her, where her husband greets the new addition to the family with, "That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." We then see snippets of Leatherface growing up and the beginnings of his skin disease. Eventually he comes to mutilate himself, cutting off chunks of his flesh and replacing it with a leather mask.

His wasted flesh then becomes a symbol of the mainstream culture's waste of scarce resources. The cannibal family's most precious resource is flesh, and its waste is significant. In similar fashion, mainstream culture wastes resources essential to its operation in staggering amounts. As of 1997, total yearly waste in America could reach

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

halfway to the moon (*Affluenza*). Leatherface is necessarily ugly because his physical beginnings make him a symbolic incarnation of capitalist production. He is an unthinking machine, ugly, and slowly but visibly decaying. But by denying his human identity, however ugly, he actually transforms himself into a being stripped of humanity and merely an analog of the capitalist identity.

The wasteful society must hide its waste, however, in order to project an image. The mainstream society hides its waste in faraway landfills, and the image of order and efficiency is so essential to mainstream society that proximity to waste lowers the value we place on property and resources. Despite uniform health risks and nuisances that come with living near a landfill, landfill proximity affects the property values of wealthy homes far more than low-income homes, and has practically no effect on rural properties (Reichert, Small, and Mohanty 298). This signifies that the upper echelon, the guardians of the capitalist system, refuse to acknowledge the existence of waste and place a low monetary value on it.

Just as the wealthy of mainstream society are the guardians of capitalism, Leatherface, the strongest of the cannibal family, is the guardian of his society's underground form of capitalism. He, like the guardians of mainstream capitalism, must cover up his own waste. He covers it up with a mask of leather, representing the meat that his culture most values, just like the guardians of capitalism cover up their own waste behind marble facades and beautiful lawns, because their highest cultural value financial prosperity.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Chapter 2: The Mask

The mask disguises that which is undesirable in an underground culture, and also what is undesirable in a monster's individual psychic identity. Additionally the mask projects cultural and individual values and in this way provides power for the individual or the society. The removal or alteration of the mask strips its wearer of power and renders him vulnerable. Without the mask, the monster is just another person. Without a façade of values, the culture is barely a culture at all.

One of the frontrunners for masked monster movies is John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). There are no real societal explanations for Michael Myers's evil in this film, and Michael's therapist explains his behavior away as purely, naturally, and simply evil. Unlike Leatherface, whose 1970's incarnation also carried this description, there is nothing wrong with Michael physically. He grows to be a somewhat large man, but not in any hyperbolic or supernatural way. He appears normal as a child, and still appears normal as a man, when we get a short glimpse of his face. His upbringing, as well, was apparently normal up until his first murders. He grew up on a quiet suburban street with appropriately-placed trees and flower beds and litter- and graffiti-free streets.

The only oddity surrounding Michael is his strange habit of wearing masks. In the opening scene, we the audience find ourselves looking through the eyeholes of a mask, unaware of who we are. We see ourselves carrying a butcher knife through a neat suburban house as if in seek and destroy mode, and we watch ourselves bloodily murder a young woman and her boyfriend. We then walk out into the quiet suburban street

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

innocently celebrating Halloween, when adults remove the mask and reveal the murderer as a young boy, and our identities are severed from his.

From the start, we have every indication that this boy is meant to be normal. He grows up in what we would consider a normal household. He is a white, middle class male whose identity is fused with ours. Yet it is this, and not supernatural and otherworldly powers, that makes Michael Myers all the more horrific. He is a monster born of normalcy, the poster child of our own society, and yet he is evil to the core. Just as Michael's mask hides his normal appearance from his victims, the mask of suburban normalcy hides his evil from the rest of the world. Our vision of a simple, middle class, 1950's nostalgia-dominated life is actually a cover for the raw, natural, bloody evil that lives within.

This evil is not only significant because it is born of normalcy, but because it takes the shape of the young. It is not only the present that is tainted in this film, but the future as well. When the children of our nostalgic dreams are naturally endowed with incurable homicidal mania, then there is no hope for the future. In this way, we have both hope for the future and fear of the future. We hope that one day the future will be better because of the influences we had on our children, and at the same time we fear a loss of control over our future when our own generations fade away. We hope for the future because our imprint on it may grant us some posthumous control over it, and we fear for the future because our control over it may be lost. Ultimately, our greatest fear regarding our children, the future, and our way of life is our loss of control over it. In this case, the opposites of hope and fear come together to reveal to us not an inconsistency in our

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

ideology, but the basic fear that we may not have enough control over our world. This is certainly true of the capitalist market. Just as we have no control over the system which oppresses us, so the Myers family has no control over the evil lurking inside their own micro version of the system.

The mask is the crux of this identity. Both the mainstream culture's identity and Michael's identity thrive on appearance alone. Without his mask, Michael is powerless. We first see this in the beginning, when his parents take off his mask, and he stops dead in his tracks. While he was actively and unstoppably seeking and destroying members of his own family with the mask on, he stands frozen with his knife, his eyes staring and vacant, when the mask is removed. Without the mask, Michael is revealed for what he is: normal.

This happens once more in the film, toward the end. As Michael stalks Jamie Lee Curtis through the house, he briefly removes his mask, giving us the only glimpse of Michael's adult face that we will ever see in this film or in any of the sub-par sequels to come. It is then that Jamie Lee Curtis is able to ambiguously defeat him and escape with her life. When Michael reveals himself as a normal-looking man, he loses his power.

Mainstream society is the mirror image of Michael. We see this first when Michael's family chooses to deal with their tragedy quietly, by sending little Michael away to an asylum. We also know this on a more general scale in the fact that Michael is a product of normalcy. Michael is normalcy behind a mask of evil, while his culture of origin is evil behind a mask of normalcy. Literally speaking, Michael is the evil living in a normal home, making the suburban neighborhood a mask for an evil presence within.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Because we tend to incorrectly perceive America as completely middle class, this middle class setting for the origin of evil could not be more powerful.

Our cherished norms of middle class family values and 1950s-style family and interpersonal dynamics under the façade of the good, simple life are producers of unthinking rage. Another touch confirming this concept is the fact that it is the audience who looks through Michael's eyes in the beginning. Each of us generally consider ourselves normal, at least in the sense that most of us would be inclined to say that we have no homicidal rage and are not evil. Our faces, like Michael's, and like the suburban façade, are normal. But behind that mask is a killer. Behind the masks of our own faces are killers just waiting to be awakened. This reality may not be apparent in all individuals, but collectively, the quiet American façade of faux perfection disguises an unquenchable thirst to consume, no matter what the cost to others. Our brand-name clothing, for example, signifies a middle class identity as well, but the origins of this particular façade usually lie in sweatshops in third world countries.

Because we are no different from Michael, the film would argue, and traditional values created the offending evil in the first place, the only person who can defeat this evil is someone who wears no mask. Critics commonly believe that *Halloween* conveys Puritanical messages because of the wholesale slaughter of sexually active teenagers (*American Nightmare*). However, the reason these teenagers in particular die is because their activities fail to correspond with their outward lifestyle. These teenagers are from a traditional suburb which upholds traditional values. Their activities, on the other hand,

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

which they hide from their parents and from others in the community, are carefree, reckless, and pleasure-seeking.

This may seem normal teenage behavior, but for the purposes of the film, they are wearing masks. When one's outward appearances are not reflective of his private actions, he is wearing a metaphorical mask. Since these teenagers, then, are essentially little different from Michael in this way, they cannot fight him. Michael walks in on the teenagers engaging in their private activities before he kills them, thus stripping them of their masks. When they no longer wear their masks, they no longer have any power. A person's reliance on a mask for power is also his weakness.

Therefore, the only person who could have more power than Michael would be someone who does not wear a mask – whose outward appearances match her private behavior. Here, that person is Laurie Strode, played by Jamie Lee Curtis. Laurie does not engage in the activities her friends do. She neither has sex nor drinks, and she maintains a quiet, respectful attitude. This gives her power because her behavior mirrors her environment. Unlike Michael and her friends, she has nothing to hide. Therefore, she is not in danger of facing mortal vulnerability if her mask is stripped away.

The victory must necessarily go to Laurie, mainly because they are fighting in a decent suburban home that is both Laurie and Michael's native ground. Laurie has the ideological advantage, however, because her identity is in its proper place in such a home, while Michael must mask his roots in normalcy. Michael hunts Laurie throughout the house, and Laurie hides and defends herself in her native ground far better than Michael can hunt in it.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Articles of domesticity in particular provide Laurie with the weaponry to defeat him. At one point, Laurie stabs Michael in the eyes with a wire clothes hanger and nearly makes a getaway. The eyes are Michael's most vulnerable point behind his mask. They are the only parts of his identity that show through it. By attacking his eyes, Laurie assaults the true part of Michael, and hits him where he is most vulnerable.

Furthermore, the nature of her weapon is interesting. Laurie wields a clothes hanger while Michael wields a butcher knife. A butcher knife has more power than a clothes hanger. It is both sturdier and deadlier. However, Laurie triumphs with a clothes hanger because it is an object symbolizing the domesticity and traditional values that she genuinely upholds. Michael's butcher knife, on the other hand, is too gruesome a weapon to reflect the normalcy of his roots. At the same time, it is, technically, a domestic object, but his rejection of the domestic robs him of some of his power to wield it. From both angles he is doomed to failure against someone who is not wearing a mask.

Finally, Michael removes his mask for a few precious seconds, and this is when Laurie can defeat him. When he no longer wears his mask, he is just as helpless as the teenagers he exposed for what they were. Without his mask, he is no longer evil incarnate, but simply a man whose identity is confused. When the identity cannot correspond to itself or the world around it, its fracture is weakness.

We also see the mask as a source of power in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). We never get a glimpse of Leatherface behind his mask in this version. In fact, his name, and therefore his identity, originates from his mask. His mask does not hide his identity; his mask is his identity. We cannot set up the same identity dichotomy here as in

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Halloween because we will never know Leatherface's identity apart from the mask, but we can still see how the stripping away or the confusion of the mask robs him of his power.

According to the makers of the film, most viewers do not notice that Leatherface has three different masks: his killer mask, his mother mask, and his "pretty woman" mask. Leatherface wears the killer mask for most of the film, and while he is wearing it, he is unstoppable. This mask unearths Leatherface's homicidal and evil tendencies, and renders him impossible to fight and impossible to flee.

However, his identity changes when he dons either of the other masks. The mask he wears second most often is the mother mask. When he wears the mother mask, he becomes domestic and whiny. He shuffles through the house with his shoulders hunched subserviently, fussing about and making irritating whining noises. He shrinks away from his father, whom he could easily destroy, and he fears the authority of male influence which he could otherwise kill without difficulty.

The third mask, which he wears only at the end of the film, strips him of all power and influence. He dons the "pretty woman" mask in an attempt to dress up for the family's perverted dinner party with Sally Hardesty. It is this mask that ultimately prevents him from chasing Sally down when she escapes. He bumbles around with the chainsaw, looking like a ridiculous parody of womanhood, and it is during this scene that we witness the first real gore of the entire movie. Leatherface, while wearing the identity of a pretty woman, cuts himself with his own chainsaw and allows Sally to jump into the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

back of a truck and get away. Leatherface's response is to twirl around with the roaring chainsaw and make high-pitched noises slightly reminiscent of a woman's yell.

The pretty woman identity, as we see from this film, is incompatible with the sufficiently brutal wielding of chainsaws. The chainsaw turns on him because his identity rejects its usage. It is also a symbol of his impotence, because he does not know how to wield his own blade. Without the unity of his identity and his purpose, he becomes fractured and unable to accomplish anything.

In the 2003 version, on the other hand, the mask plays just as significant a role, but the terms of its usage and misuse are reversed. In the original, Leatherface fails because he takes on a feminine identity. In the remake, Leatherface fails because he does not take on a feminine identity. Once Leatherface has officially begun his killing spree, he captures and kills the male leader of the hapless youths, and then removes his face and wears it as a mask. In doing so, he harnesses the power of the male leader, and thus, in his perception, emasculates the entire party.

It is not just the male identity that Leatherface takes on, because he does not remove the faces of the other males he kills. It is only the identity of the male leader in which he is interested. He also has no interest in wearing the faces of female victims. We see evidence of this when Leatherface captures Andy, Morgan, and Pepper, the other young people on the excursion and does not skin their faces. Even though Leatherface dismembers and captures Andy, another male figure, before he successfully attacks any of the others, Kemper is the first one he actually kills. However, Leatherface fails to realize that Erin, the male leader's girlfriend, is the true leader of the group. Kemper may

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

appear to be the leader, as he exudes a working-class breadwinner persona with his mechanic uniform and is ultimately in charge of the group's transportation and is responsible for making the final decisions. However, Erin holds sway over his choices.

In the beginning, Erin discovers that Kemper and his friends purchased marijuana on their trip to Mexico for resale in the U.S. Her anger toward Kemper leads him to throw it all away, and then later on, after a hitchhiker the group has picked up shoots herself in their van, Erin is the one who convinces Kemper to continue searching for the non-existent police rather than dump the body and move on. Her influence is the real power behind all the group's actions and decisions, and therefore she is the true leader. Yet, Leatherface does not recognize her as the leader, and his subsequent failure to kill her and take her identity results in his defeat at her hand. This also signifies that stealing Kemper's identity did not endow him with enough power to take down the rest of the party. Hence, it is again a case of mistaken identity that leads to Leatherface's downfall, but in a different and more significant way.

The remake contains another interesting feature of Leatherface's masked identity because it is the first and only time in any of the films that we see Leatherface without any mask at all. Like Michael Myers, we only see his face for a few seconds, but not while he is engaged in combat with his victims. He appears otherworldly, almost UFO-like without his mask, lacking a nose or a normal skin shade. This is also the first film in which anyone mentions his skin disease. Without his mask, his identity is flawed, decaying, and degenerate, and this is why he needs the identity of others to give him

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

power, and why he systematically watches his victims from a distance and attempts to determine which victim's identity holds the most power.

The revelation of his true identity, like in *Halloween*, is the precursor to his downfall. While not as direct a connection as in *Halloween*, once we see him stripped of his power, the illusion is broken and he reveals himself as powerless. We have seen this same destruction of the power illusion in our own world, particularly in the World Trade Center attacks of 2001. The U.S. appears impregnable and powerful beyond all imagination, but as soon as an enemy breeches this image, the U.S. appears vulnerable, confused, and negligent. High towers in booming metropolises are America's mask, creating an illusion of power and prosperity over a capitalist system that does not grant such power and prosperity to all. When this illusion is broken, we are left with only rubble and crippling fear then holds sway.

In the 2006 prequel, we see Leatherface first enter the world of the mask. After disfiguring his own face, he creates his first mask from leather. Once he has destroyed the fleshy incarnation of his previous identity, he chooses a mask that suits the strength of his livelihood. He is a butcher, from a family of butchers, who consume the power of cattle. His new identity of consumption harnesses the raw power of the strong animals he slaughters.

Hence, it is only natural that, once the family has switched from cattle to humans, he would symbolically take the power of human beings rather than cattle. The scene where we first see Leatherface take the power of the male leader of his first pack of

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

victims is one of discovery. He touches and caresses his victim, Eric's, face, examining it from all sides, wondering if he should take the next step, while Eric squirms with fear.

By donning the faces of members of the mainstream society, it is as if Leatherface is attempting to return to such an identity. He cannot have an identity suitable to the mainstream society, so he must steal it from someone who does. This will only isolate him more from society's norms, but by imitating them in this way, he establishes that his lifestyle is one that takes after that of the mainstream.

While he wore the mask of cow's flesh, he took on a natural identity – one that lived on consumption that did not cause suffering, and only took what it needed. When he wears the mask of a mainstream human, his values change. He now consumes whether or not his consumption causes suffering. When he wore a leather mask, he wore a proletarian identity. When he wears a human mask, he wears the identity of the capitalist.

We can see the evidence of this directly in his behavior. When he wears the leather mask, we first see him working in the slaughterhouse, making an honest living without harming anyone. His first kill, however, is the slaughterhouse owner, whose negligence has caused the slaughterhouse to be condemned and shut down. In true capitalist fashion, he ignores the well-being of his customers and his workers in the name of profit, and in the end the workers must suffer for it by losing their livelihoods. In fact, the whole town disintegrates because of the selfish actions of a single capitalist. This same boss was also the one responsible for abandoning Leatherface in a dumpster when he was a baby, and watching idly while his mother went into violent labor on his line.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

This capitalist, who cares more for the commodity he produces than for human life or human suffering, is Leatherface's first kill. The act of killing him completes his divorce from a mainstream capitalist identity which began with the shaving off of his face. This serves the dual purpose of generating our sympathy for Leatherface, because the capitalist has clearly destroyed life for all the working class in the area. Interestingly enough, he slaughters the capitalist just as he would slaughter cattle, with a sledgehammer to the head and then dismemberment with a chainsaw. Here his leather mask is appropriate, because while he wears it and kills the butcher, the slaughtered slaughters the slaughterer.

As soon as Leatherface has slaughtered, he becomes the slaughterer. He is a new kind of capitalist – one whose destruction of human life for his own gain is openly palpable. It is after this slaughter that he must make his second kill: Eric, the male leader of the young victims. Eric is now the cattle to be slaughtered, and Leatherface must not only wear the identity and power of his prey, but he must take on a new identity. The face of a human is the face of the capitalist, the butcher, and Leatherface's new identity firmly establishes his family's new culture as a dark analog of the mainstream culture.

Had Leatherface taken the slaughterhouse owner's face as a mask, though, he would have taken on the identity of the mainstream capitalist. Instead, he still takes on the identity of the slaughtered, but of the human slaughtered. Eric is oppressed because the back story of the film shows us that he is on his way to be redeployed as a foot soldier in Vietnam. He is fighting the war of the oppressor, and because he has been drafted, he is oppressed. However, his status causes him to oppress the Vietnamese. Eric is both the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

oppressor and the oppressed, caught somewhere in the middle of the mainstream hierarchy.

Because of this, Leatherface's identity is a bit more complicated than capitalist-proletariat. He is still oppressed because he has taken the identity of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. But by taking a human face rather than a cow's, he has established himself as something greater than passively oppressed. Thus, Eric's identity as oppressed/oppressor is transposed onto Leatherface, who also becomes oppressed/oppressor. If Leatherface were not oppressed by the machinations of capitalism, he would have no need to become an oppressor, and if Eric were not oppressed by the draft into a capitalist war, he would not have to act as an oppressor. Once more this leads us to an inherent contradiction of our culture. The oppressed and the oppressor join together in a paradox that both displays circular logic and makes horrific sense.

Leatherface's new identity in these new movies, as symbolized by the mask, creates a more sympathetic rendering. While in earlier films he is merely a physical machine with a confused identity, here he is visibly oppressed and forced to adapt his identity in order to survive. His mistake of choosing only the male identity to steal stems from his associations with oppression. He does not realize that the woman's identity symbolizes the power of the oppressed without becoming oppressors. Erin in the remake is still working class, and, as we find out from her car theft skills, has been to juvenile detention. She is certainly not the oppressor, and the fact that Kemper is willing to deal

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

marijuana to raise money to help them start their life together shows that they are economically oppressed.

Erin still possesses power, but she possesses it without oppressing anyone. It is Leatherface's refusal to gain power without oppressing that ultimately leads to his downfall. The oppressed are generally doomed to a life of suffering and hardship, and the oppressor must always fall. Even the oppressor is forced into oppressing, as was the unfortunate outcome of the war in Vietnam, which left over 58,000 U.S. troops killed, the vast majority of them on the military's lowest pay grade (National Archives). The only winner in this game is the one who can find power in oppression and use it to make a meaningful life. Leatherface cannot understand this because he is too physical, with neither fully-developed mental or emotional capacity. While we can sympathize with the cannibal family's cause because they are oppressed, we cannot escape oppression through more oppression.

This message is what ultimately makes the films as difficult to swallow as a human pot pie. We recognize ourselves as both oppressor and oppressed, since we live in a nation that has the highest standard of living, but still economically oppresses masses of its citizens, with an underestimated U.S. poverty rate of 12.3%, or 37 million people living in poverty in 2006 (America's Second Harvest). There is no escape except to do as Erin does, and accept our own oppression without oppressing others. However, to do this would require not participating in the capitalist system, which allocates wealth such that citizens have either too much or not enough, and contributing to the system is as simple

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

as finding a job and working to feed oneself. At last we cannot escape the cycle, and we are doomed to either fall or suffer.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Chapter 3: The Mind

Identity in horror incarnates itself in flesh as well as in masks, but it finds just as significant a home in the mind. Namely, ghastly identity burrows its way into the minds of horror victims and monsters alike through the nature and causes of insanity. Some films explore what the monster looks like; others explore what the monster thinks like. The psychology of horror resides not just in cerebral capacities, but in misplaced love and hate, and even in religion and metaphysics.

Starting full-swing in 1980 with Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13th*, we see a highly unusual monster take center stage. This monster is not a masked madman or a freakish physical force, but a kindly-looking older woman seeking to avenge the death of her young son. As we watch young people systematically killed off one by one in gruesome and horrifying ways, we and the victims expect to see a monster in the end. Instead, at the very last we witness a normal, average-looking woman with a crackly, motherly voice approach in a soft, unassuming turtleneck sweater.

This woman could be our own mother, and we least expect her to be the brutal monster behind the brutal murders. She is a grief-stricken woman with purely human, purely understandable motives. Her evil does not lie in any warped physicality or evil mask, but in her own mind. Grief causes her insanity, which results in misplaced love and hate. Here, the opposing forces of love and hate are incarnated in domesticity and carnage, respectively. Carnage lies within our typical domestic security, and the carnage carries with it a sort of love. When the lines between good and evil are so blurred, the confusion itself, and its subsequent paranoia, are what is truly frightening in this scenario.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Mrs. Voorhees is not only frightening because her normality causes us to trust her, but because she calls wrongs into account, and she wreaks her revenge on anyone who remotely resembles those who have done her wrong. She sees young people, like those responsible for the death of her son, to form a society of some sort, like relatively innocent members of a capitalist society represent its evils.

The thought of our indirect capitalist crimes one day being called into account is truly frightening. How, for example, could anyone explain to a starving child that regular citizens in the United States have nothing to do with the fact that total aid from developing countries has a \$3.1 trillion shortfall over thirty years from what we have promised (Shah)? How could anyone explain to radical Muslims that regular U.S. citizens furthering the World Trade Organization and its practices which undermine the environment and the worker in favor of multinational corporations had nothing to do with the oppression of their people (Global Exchange)? We are the representatives of and contributors to a system that is very often unfair to a great number of people.

Friday the 13th Part 2 (1981) shows us more of the same, although this time it is Jason's twisted psychology that is the heart of the evil. Jason is a complicated character, because his evil identity lies in the flesh, the mask, and the mind simultaneously. Like *Halloween*, we gain, in some parts, shots from Jason's perspective, looking out from behind two eyeholes as we hunt young people. Like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Jason is deformed and unfit to live normally in mainstream society. Ultimately, though, the bulk of his identity lies in his mind.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

We know that his motivation is primarily psychological because it is not force that brings Jason to his knees, but the impromptu clinical efforts of Ginny, a Child Psychology major. When Ginny finds herself in Jason's lair without any weapons for defense, she puts on Mrs. Voorhees's old turtleneck sweater and confuses Jason into thinking that she is his mother. Psychological confusion is the same as identity confusion in this film.

This psychological, rather than societal or physical, identity confusion applies to us even more than the others. We the spectators and mainstream Americans are, in general, not inclined to wear physical masks everywhere we go, and we are typically not hugely physically deformed. However, we all have supple, exposed, and easily-damaged psyches. The psychological approach to identity puts the individual under the spotlight rather than a vaguer and more abstract notion of society in general. We as individuals, sometimes apart from society and culture, simply need the right trigger to make us evil.

David Cronenberg's 1981 film *Scanners* presents a balance between society as a whole and the individual by showing us an entire generation tainted by the mistakes of the previous one, and it is this tainted generation that must live with the consequences, getting no help from its parents – only exploitation. *Scanners* revolves around a drug originally concocted to ease morning sickness in pregnant women, but it actually endows their unborn children with mental powers. Their primary mental power is the ability to “scan” another person's mind. They can use this ability to read minds, or even to make another person's head explode. However, these seemingly useful powers come with a

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

heavy price which includes violent migraines and insanity. One evil scanner, Daryl Revok, even drills a hole in his head in an attempt to stop hearing voices.

This film shows us a very clearly dark, underground society, and a morally ambiguous mainstream society. The mainstream society has no qualms about using scanners as weapons to be exploited for destruction and profit, and the dark, underground society doesn't mind using the technocracy to give Ephemerol, the drug that created them, to pregnant women in order to create an army.

Since both a party of good scanners and a party of evil scanners exist, good and evil exist as a duality inside each individual, and it is the individual's choice that must determine whether he is good or evil. However, this duality does not just extend to the individual, but also to society. The individual's choices clearly make a difference, and if a scanner chooses to be good, then certain undesirable elements like exploding heads are reduced, if not eliminated. Still, the choice is ultimately between the mainstream and the underground society, and both are evil.

Scanners presents more complicated dualities than previous films, because not only can societies mirror each other as dark or light, but individuals can mirror each other in the same way. While Leatherface is the polar opposite of Erin in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Cameron, the good scanner, and Daryl, the evil scanner, are brothers, and both appear on the surface to be normal citizens. Furthermore, their father is the very doctor who invented Ephemerol and chose to test it on them even when he knew its true effects.

The brothers are products of a man who embodies both the mainstream and the underground societies. On the surface he is a respectable doctor whose motives are purely

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

for the sake of knowledge, but he intentionally tests ambiguous substances on his own sons, and then tests them in laboratories, lets them live in squalor, and refuses to take a parental role with them, all so he can observe them from a cold, objective distance. As if that were not enough, he then goes on to work for the defense agency that studies them and attempts to exploit them as weapons.

His actions are reprehensible, but his motives are ambiguous. He seems to be working in the name of furthering knowledge, and it could be argued that he takes the role of observing scientist in order to keep an eye on his sons and protect them from others. He even comes around in the end, and has a repentant moment before a corrupt military officer kills him. At last, human beings are not purely good or purely evil, but an odd combination of both.

This even extends to Daryl, who tries to welcome his brother to the evil scanner movement. He is loyal to family, when he does not feel betrayed by them, and he understandably feels cheated by mainstream society, which has kept him locked in an observation room his entire life. Even though he kills anyone who gets in his way and ultimately plans to subdue non-scanners as minions, he feels he is on a mission to rescue fellow scanners from mainstream culture and incorporate them into a community.

While Cameron goes through the film with innocent blue eyes and naïve good intentions, after his final battle with Daryl, in which they merge, it is impossible to tell which of the brothers prevails. Daryl destroys Cameron's body, but in the end we see Daryl with Cameron's eyes, speaking in Cameron's voice, saying, "It's over. We've won." The credits roll before we ever find out which "we," exactly, has won.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

This is a confusing world filled with madness, where character and society are both ambiguous. In the end, good and evil are indistinguishable, inhabiting the same space and body and proposing the same level of destruction. However, there is one distinguishing characteristic of evil, whether it is mainstream or underground. A corporation is always the medium for evil, more specifically, a corporation that sells mind-altering products. Since our culture is built on corporations, which we rely upon for food, shelter, the basic comforts of life, and even election results, the idea that evil can be mass-produced like a drug and then distributed without our knowledge is as frightening as it is plausible.

This film combines our fears of the system with our fears of the loss of our psychological identity. The two, like good and evil, go hand in hand. Cameron and Daryl are essentially two halves of one complete whole, and it is only natural that they should eventually come together. The side that prevails, however, depends upon individual choice and individual strength. The hardest part to swallow is that no matter what the cost, what the sacrifice, or what choices we eventually make, we will, in the end, serve the cause of evil.

Another psychological horror film that hits a bit closer to the common American image is Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The monster, Freddy Kruger, is less of the normal-looking human being we have become accustomed to in this era and more of the sort of supernatural and otherworldly figure common in earlier films. Freddy is a man covered in burn scars who makes appearances in people's nightmares. He has

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

the power to kill people in the real world as they dream, and he can only be defeated when dragged into the waking world.

While at first glance Freddy's supernaturalism may seem to cast him as "The Other" rather than the personal, human horror incarnation typical of horror films of the latter 20th century, it is the nature of his non-humanity that places him firmly in the realm of the common American psyche. Freddy, having once been human and a child murderer who was burned alive by angry parents in the neighborhood, is neither from Hell nor any other supernatural realm. He is the apparition and creation of the average human mind who has no real power outside of it.

We discover in later Freddy films that Freddy only has power when he exists in people's memories. He is a creature who feeds off fear and cannot harm anyone who does not fear him. Freddy is inseparable from our own minds, and as such his evil resides in one of the key components of humanity: imagination. With our imaginations come our fears, and with our fears comes evil; therefore, to be human is to carry the seeds evil.

Considering the roster of victims, though, this film suggests that to be a young member of white, middle-class American suburbia is to carry the seeds to evil. Since, being infantilized consumers, we see this categorization as typical of American life, we can extend the observation to say that to simply be American in this film is to carry the seeds of evil. Elm Street is the best, and most "typical," of America, and Elm Street has minds riddled with fear and evil that threatens to brutally destroy it from within.

Interestingly enough, it is not just the individual's psyche that gives Freddy power, but the community's. Freddy draws his power from the collective, rather than the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

individual fear of him. The more people fear him, the more power he has. Therefore, it is our own collective consciousness that is our true enemy. It is culture and society that lend power to evil, and it is culture and society that will destroy itself from within, and will take us with it.

Also of note is that adults are rarely affected, and not affected at all in the first film, by Freddy. It is only the young – children and adolescents, who are Freddy's prime target. In life he murdered children, and in death he continues to do the same. The young people know nothing about Freddy when he begins to attack them, because they are too young to remember him. Freddy is the nightmare of the previous generation, which still remembers and fears him.

Freddy is evil passed down from one generation to another, and even though the previous generation gives the evil power, they deny responsibility for it and even question their children's sanity when they go to them for help. Even when the adults discover their children dying in bloody and gruesome ways, they hush up the problem and try to uncover the murderer in conventional ways without taking their children's fears and observations into account.

The evil the current society bestows on its children is hidden, in the dark, and strikes only when the children try to rest. The only way this evil can be defeated is when it is dragged into the waking world for all to see. This scenario is not what the children fear, but what the adults fear. The children have simple fears of death; the adults fear that their secrets will be revealed. Since the adults have more power in society, they will

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

choose to assuage their own fears rather than safeguard their children. Hence it is the powerless of society that must face the mistakes and evils of the powerful.

Fears about the Middle East were prevalent even in the 1980s, when this movie premiered. In 1984, Iran accused Iraq of testing chemical weapons, which Saddam Hussein would use on his own people later in the decade while the U.S., the powerful force comparable here to the parents on Elm Street, stood by and did nothing. This is true somewhat of the current war in Iraq. As of 2006, of the soldiers who have died in Iraq, 34% came from the lowest income bracket, roughly 50% from the middle income bracket, and only 17% from the highest income bracket (CBS). This does not even take into account the soldiers serving who have been wounded or who have not died.

Like Michael Myers, Freddy Kruger represents the evil lurking behind everyday America. Even without ourselves being evil, we perpetuate and strengthen it whether we have knowledge of it or not. If the community is aware of evil and does nothing to stop it, then it seeps into the collective consciousness and poisons it until all that is left to it is destruction.

Bursting onto the film scene in 1987, Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* series brought a metaphysical spin to the horror scene. Particularly, *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth* (1992) and *Hellraiser: Inferno* (2000) show us that our institutions of defense against evil are ineffective, and that the only real Hell is the one inside our minds.

Hellraiser III begins with a scene of an urban skyline with a young man in a hot rod and leather jacket smoking a cigarette, alerting us to the presence not only of a booming modern society, but also to the presence and pleasure-seeking ways of the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

young. Another shot in a city bus reveals an ad that reads, “Prepare for the Second Coming! Church of the Resurgence – credit card donations 1-800-NEW-GODS.” The overall picture is bleak and dark. There is little daylight on this cityscape, and the further fact that one of the main settings in this film is a nightclub called The Boiler Room which features unabashed debauchery is another telling symbol that the world presented here – our world – is filled with evil, selfishness, and lack of direction toward any higher purpose.

The Hellraiser series centers on Pinhead, the booming-voiced, BSM gear-clad head demon who occasionally makes an appearance on earth when some pleasure-seeking human releases him from his puzzle box. When he appears, he drags the human down to Hell, and, in accordance with the victims’ earthly pleasures of choice, turns him into a Cenobite who will serve him for all eternity. One Cenobite, formerly a DJ, spits razor CDs out of his head, and another, a cameraman, shoots deadly explosions out of a camera lodged through his eye. Basically, we are all Cenobites, with human pleasures and vices, but with a layer of restraining flesh around us. All Pinhead does is bring out what is already there.

Pinhead himself, in his confrontation with the protagonist after he has slaughtered seemingly hundreds of people packing the nightclub, reveals his philosophy of human life. He declares,

There is a secret song at the center of the world...And its sound is like razors through flesh...Oh, come. Oh, you can hear its faint echo right now. I’m here to

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

turn up the volume, to press the stinking face of humanity into the dark blood of its own secret heart.

Pinhead declares what the rest of us deny: violence is not a symptom of ethereal or otherworldly evil. Without the evil actions of human beings, there would be no Hell to punish them and no demons to do its bidding. Hell is only a reflection of who we are, and the Cenobites are just ordinary human beings with their true selves physically exposed. The poles of physical life and supernatural life lose all distinction when Pinhead stalks onto the scene. Physical life is disorderly, chaotic, and often evil, but we traditionally consider the supernatural realm as the place where justice, order, reward, and punishment make all past wrongs right again. But when the physical life and the supernatural life become indistinguishable, there is no more hope for a better future.

Because evil is our nature, goodness is only a cultural illusion, and the societal practice of it is ineffective in stopping the horrible power within us. Perhaps the most famous scene of *Hellraiser III* occurs when Joey, the woman Pinhead is pursuing, flees into a Catholic church and runs into the arms of a priest. She tells the priest that a demon is after her, and he replies, almost amused, that there are no such things as demons, and that they are merely symbols. His comment is promptly cut down when Pinhead enters the sanctuary.

The priest is both right and wrong in this scene. In the real world, demons are symbols of evil, but at the same time they are more than symbols, because the evil they represent is strong enough to devour everything. Anything that stands in for evil in our

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

everyday cultural lexicon is never “just a symbol.” Rather, they are the truth, which is so profound that we can only understand them through such symbols.

Then, in a moment dripping with Protestantism, the priest holds a silver cross in front of Pinhead and commands him to leave the sanctuary. Pinhead coolly responds, “Thou shalt not bow down before any graven image,” and the cross melts in the priest’s hand. The silver cross represents the materialism of mainstream society. It is not a deity of goodness that we worship, but its graven image. Even our religion, according to the film and me, is based on a thin materialism that will only burn us in the face of evil.

The most telling moment in the scene is when Pinhead drives pins from his head into his palms, holds out his arms as if experiencing a crucifixion, and says, “*I am the way.*” Afterwards, he takes a piece of his own bloody flesh and makes the priest eat it in a mock Communion ceremony. Not only have our traditional cultural safeguards failed to protect us, but they are taken over by evil. This notion is still frightening to us today, especially after the scandals involving pedophilic Catholic priests. Furthermore, with pastors of mega churches with thousands of members flying private jets, it seems that even in the Protestant world materialism is rampant and valued over doctrine and dogma.

This film’s economic message about the state of cultural religion was almost prophetic, as now ticket prices for Joel Osteen and other “prosperity preachers” rival popular concert acts. Many such preachers are more like motivational speakers or financial advisors than professors of their faith, offering no protection against the evil that resides in everyone. In fact, the common doctrine of today that it is a sin to be poor places

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

modern religion firmly within the status of the oppressor, using the pulpit to further oppressive capitalist propaganda.

The final scene of this film is of Joey burying Pinhead's puzzle box in wet concrete, presumably where no one will ever again be able to access it. Instead, the place where she buries the box becomes the site for a new building which inexplicably holds enormous renditions of the box in the walls, pillars, and even the foundation. It is a behemoth and alluring structure employing practically every modern architectural style imaginable. It is a testament to the modern world and its modern values. It is a structure that epitomizes the progress of humankind and its mainstream society, and it is built on the evils of Hell. The end result is a powerful symbol that makes us question the values upon which we plant our society. Are we working for good? Or do we work to erect edifices of our own power built on a foundation of evil? The film leaves the question frighteningly open-ended.

Eight years after *Hellraiser III*, *Hellraiser: Inferno* took the series out of the physical realm and planted it more firmly in the world of the psychological and metaphysical. Here we see a man, a cop, no less, the enforcer of human order, wandering through a dark urban labyrinth of pleasure and pain. He walks in circles, conducting a solitary investigation and trying to find a criminal called The Engineer, only to discover that he is actually in his "own personal Hell" run by a force over which he has no control.

In the end, all he has control over is his own flesh and his ability to destroy it, but the real horror of Pinhead is his ability to take that final power away from us. When Joseph, the cop, tries to escape his Hell through suicide, he discovers that his

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

investigation of The Engineer merely starts all over again. No one ever tells us explicitly who The Engineer really is. It could be Pinhead, or it could be Joseph himself. His own mind, after all, is what creates this Hell, and his own actions render him worthy of living in it.

The *Hellraiser* series in general brings all the horror themes full circle. Pinhead often threatens in the series to tear his victims' souls apart, but all he does is tear their flesh apart with the help of hooks and chains that fly out of walls and thin air at his silent command. Tearing souls apart is just a matter of tearing flesh apart. Therefore, the soul is nothing more than the flesh, as Pinhead comments: "There is only flesh." The added psychological elements that *Hellraiser* brings to the horror scene do not invalidate the flesh-only identity, but complicate it. Our minds are powerful entities, capable of creating worlds of madness for us. However, they are still only hunks of flesh available for mutilation. Our existences are purely flesh, but our minds create our worlds, and they create Pinhead and all the evil he represents. Our society rests on an uneasy and ambiguous foundation. It is we, after all, with all our good intentions, who place the puzzle box into the wet concrete with Joey, and it is we who must endure the hells of our own psyches.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) has none of the elements of the metaphysical that we see in *Hellraiser*, but much of the family's evil is linked back to madness. To reiterate, the fact that Edwin Neal, the hitchhiker, studied for the role by observing his paranoid schizophrenic nephew, displays clear traces of insanity in the family's identity. While Gunnar Hansen studied for Leatherface from the mentally

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

disabled, Edwin Neal studied for the hitchhiker from the mentally disturbed (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: A Family Portrait Revisited*). There is little explanation for their insanity itself. While it is clear that the evil actions of the cannibal family are not just a matter of insanity, but of society and the economy as well, their insanity plays a large role. The same is true of the 2003 remake, where the family members engage in socially erratic behaviors that can only be described as “crazy.”

Of all three of the *Texas Chainsaw* films, though, the 2006 prequel contains the most elements of the psychological and the metaphysical. In the beginning, after Leatherface has killed the slaughterhouse owner, the town sheriff and the family patriarch hunt for him. As they close in on him walking down a dusty road toting his new chainsaw, the sheriff remarks, “That ‘tarded nephew of yours killed a man.” To which the family patriarch and soon-to-be town sheriff responds, “He ain’t retarded. He’s just misunderstood.”

Because Leatherface never speaks and never seems to fully comprehend what others say to him, he is perceived as retarded by members of the community. However, the retort that they simply misunderstand him equates the notion of mental disorder to misunderstanding for the first time in the entire series of *Texas Chainsaw* films. If Leatherface is just misunderstood, then they are all just misunderstood, as far as the family is concerned.

Previously, insanity marked the Otherness necessary to make a villain, and even if we could sympathize with the monster, we still all understood that they were somehow insane, even if their insanity was not a product of their own design. However, this simple

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

comment on Leatherface's mental state brings the monster out of the Otherly realm and into the realm of humanity. After all, is it not possible for any of us to be misunderstood? This takes away the shroud of foreignness and casts the family in a light of normality. Ultimately, this casting is more frightening than their potential insanity, because in this moment the family has completed its metamorphosis: its members are now just like any of the rest of us.

The final metaphysical moment of the film comes when the family patriarch, now sheriff of the dilapidated and abandoned town, says grace over a stew made from the flesh of the former sheriff. He invokes God's blessing on the family and cites it as the reason why the family "will never go hungry again." His prayer is more a statement of purpose than a plea to a higher power, but the family receives it with the same awe, fear, and reverence as they would an actual appeal to God. The family's new religion is one of faithfulness to "the place of our birth," and it is one of never-ending loyalty to the family and to ensuring that they finally receive the prosperity they deserve.

This prayer sounds familiar. It encapsulates the values of the mainstream culture: faith, family, and prosperity. The Hewitts are now just like any other hard-working, family-oriented, faith-based unit, with the one exception that they dine on human flesh. The basis of traditional American Christianity is that the good will one day receive the blessings they deserve, and there is a "pie in the sky" waiting for them after death. This family, however, has grown tired of waiting.

The dichotomy of prosperity and deprivation shows us the realities of our own culture. Having been promised prosperity by their former society, all they received in

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

return, no matter how hard they worked for it, was deprivation. Even when they have created their own society, they still face only deprivation, suggesting that for the oppressed of either the mainstream capitalist system or the underground capitalist system, deprivation is the constant reality. Because the oppressed have taken on the role of ruling class in their own economy, their society is one where deprivation itself has had enough. This fear is legitimate and striking in our culture, firstly because the concept of the deprived attempting to take by force whatever prosperity they can find severely upsets the status quo, and secondly because there is no escape – those who have taken control of their own market are still locked in deprivation, and their market still reflects our own in gruesome and terrifying ways.

They, like many workers, struggle every day to put food on the table, and get no reward for goodness. The traditional American Christianity did not save them when the slaughterhouse closed and their livelihoods were destroyed, because traditional American Christianity is more concerned with telling its believers to wait until death for peace. With death by starvation just around the corner, this family simply had enough. The traditional modes of culture and morality failed them and left them in the dust with nothing. Their choice, which came about through no decisions of their own, came down to leaving their lifelong home or starving to death.

While they have appeared insane in their past incarnations, and they may well be in the clinical sense, the truth is that they are all “misunderstood.” Their purpose is not the sadistic pursuit of evil for its own sake, but a reclaiming of the prosperity that mainstream culture has denied them. Wes Craven once said of horror that the realization

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

that the American Dream is not entirely true “gives American horror films an additional rage” (*The American Nightmare*). This rage is not only palpable in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*: it is the only reality left.

The family, while slaughtering the young victims for food, also feels hatred toward them, because they represent an image of perfection that they will never have. They are young, strong, beautiful, loved, and accepted by society with bright futures ahead of them. They are everything that the family can never be. These victims are also what most of us can never completely be. There is a reason why young people go to horror films and cheer on the monsters as they destroy young people on the screen; it is a backlash against the image of prosperity and perfection not available to the vast majority of America. The family does what we secretly wish we could do: they make their own living on their own terms and they fight back against the cultural forces that have denied them even the comforts of their own roots.

We simultaneously wish we could be the cannibal family and the young victims, and these wishes become complicated when we realize that, metaphorically, we are simultaneously similar to both the family and the victims. Our identities are conflicted. We do not know for certain whether we are the hunter or the hunted, and, most frighteningly, we do not know for certain whether we want to be the hunter or the hunted. Our collective minds’ identity confusion ultimately shows us the truth that all of the options and their combinations are true. Not only do we understand the battle of the haves and the have nots, but we subconsciously understand the rage in ourselves. We embody

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

the rage as much as we fear it, and this is why we cast our lot with the monster, sympathize with him, and fear him.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Conclusion: Society

The primary lesson we learn from these films is that there is no hope as our situation currently stands. Fear is a disease of the mind and of society which can have a cure. But without hope, fear becomes reality itself. The collective nightmare of America has transformed in the last sixty years from the war against outside change to a silent implosion of dead hopes and broken dreams. In the 1960s and 70s, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War snapped us out of our quiet reverie and into a world of violence and hatred. While the nation feared violence and hatred from without, we suddenly realized that all along it was within, and that the cancer we ignored slowly grew until it came to be that our culture was too sick to save.

The result is constant apocalypse. Without hope, we are the youths stranded in the wilderness fighting monsters, knowing that even if we survive, our lives will never again be the same. The cold reality of horror is not of a monster from outer space or a communist from a faraway country, but of the image in the mirror. As Adam Lowenstein astutely observed,

...all those films show us over and over again the apocalypse isn't now; the apocalypse is always and ongoing, and there's no easy way to go back to before the apocalypse and there's no easy way to imagine a time after it. There's only this moment-to-moment struggle that we all are obligated to engage in. (*The American Nightmare*).

The fight for survival in a world where even our friends are our enemies is, according to horror movie trends, the most frightening world imaginable.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

The apocalypse of the Puritans is no longer the apocalypse of today. Even when, in every decade and every era, religious movements tell us the end is near, the apocalyptic landscape of our subconscious minds is one of hopelessness. Ultimately, the Hell that the apocalypse promises us is just a lack of hope with an unforeseeable end to human suffering. The dissolution of hope in the 1960's started off our hopeless era, and continues today as we pit terrorism paranoia against our own corruption.

The 1960's hippie and Civil Rights movements gave us hope for a time. We had hope that change could happen, and that wrongs could, in the end, be righted if we only pulled together as a community and fought for it. By the end of the decade, those dreams were all but destroyed. The Civil Rights Movement accomplished a great deal in the fight against segregation, but in the end, Dr. King was still assassinated, and hatred still prevailed.

In 1969, the hippie era reached a violent conclusion with the death of John Lennon and the Manson family murders. The Manson family, with its isolated lifestyle of drugs and free love, represented the hippie movement and then hideously subverted its values. The culture that young people of the time fought for and envisioned turned out to hold just as much evil as the mainstream culture they fought against. Charles Manson himself had stirring words for the mainstream at his trial, forcing America to finally look inward and behold the brutality it carried: "These children come at you with knives. They are your children. You taught them. I didn't teach them...What about your children? These are just a few." (*Charles Manson: Superstar*). These simple words from a simple-minded man summarized the hidden American psyche and its nightmare.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Night of the Living Dead foresaw the end of the hippie era, with young and old alike being devoured by a new and brutal society that took human form. Humans killed humans, and they did it without even pausing to understand the right or the wrong of it. By the end, the social setting was one of “violence, self-absorption, and despair” (Becker 43-47). Thus, it was only appropriate that horror films take a turn for the hopeless. Young victims replaced middle-aged heroes like Peter Cushing, and happy endings became more and more rare.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) can be said to have begun where *Night of the Living Dead* left off – with decomposing corpses, a fit beginning to what is considered the heir of the *Night of the Living Dead* legacy. The layer of hopelessness, as well as the apocalyptic elements, signaled the end of the 1960s utopian dream, and “In these narratives of the end, an apocalypse is necessary because of the inherent failure of the world’s moral character.” (Phillips 105, 107, 111). Because our culture is so far gone, so removed from the hope of ever changing and ending its oppression, and because the honest individual is powerless to change it or even stop participating in it, the final result is destruction.

We know this destruction may well sweep us away with it, but at the same time we know that it is the only way we can stop fearing ourselves. The fact that our fear of annihilation is inextricably tied to our hopes for the future makes the future itself what we must fear. Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote: “*That the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man, however, is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its horror vacui: it needs a goal – and it will rather will nothingness than not will.*” (97). We live in

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

a vacuum of horror where fear breeds more fear, but we would rather feel fear than feel nothing. In this case, we need horror, rather than asceticism, to remind us of the consequences of our will. We have willed worse than nothingness - horror - into the space behind our materialistic facades, and after all the bloodshed and all our realizations of this horror's consequences for ourselves, the final fact remains that it is preferable for us to will horror into being than to not will.

The never-ending cycle of the end is the ending theme of both *Texas Chainsaw* renditions. In 1974 Sally Hardesty, our lone triumphant hero, not only fails to destroy Leatherface, but, as we learn from the sequels, spends the rest of her life in a state of catatonia. She becomes as catatonic as the progression of human existence, and our final shot is of her laughing maniacally, gripped by the same insanity as the cannibalistic family, and streaked with her own blood.

The cycle of hopelessness is even more poignant in the 2003 version, where, in the beginning, the hitchhiker escaping from the cannibal family hitches a ride with our new set of victims, which are headed right back to the same deserted town in search of help. When she sees where the van is going, she shoots herself and forces the new protagonists to search the cannibal town for the sheriff. Had she not been running from them, the new set of youths would have driven past the town and never been faced with that situation themselves. And in the end, as Erin is running from Leatherface after all the others are dead, she hitches a ride with a trucker, who takes her back to the town for help.

Erin echoes the hitchhiker of the beginning with her same desperate, pleading, weeping words, "No...you're going the wrong way..." These words, from either of the

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

victimized women, are incomprehensible to their hearers. They do not understand that they are going the wrong way, and they cannot comprehend what evil could possibly lie at the end of their road. Erin's words are not just for the trucker; they are for all of us. We are going the wrong way. We are caught in a cycle from which we cannot escape, trapped between two worlds of evil that our choices and actions cannot break.

Ultimately, we face problems that we cannot fix with the existing order. Karl Marx once wrote that even if the rulers of society were forced to better the lives of the people, to use their power to help us wake up from the nightmare, they would only know how to proceed with the same oppression they have always shown:

But what they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premises for both [development of the productive powers and their approbation by the people]. Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever affected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation? (662).

Marx's resounding rhetorical question calls to center stage the final reality of our cultural existence. The cinematic art shows us the truth of our capitalistic nightmare through images that appeal to these subconscious fears, and we never see a solution in them, because the only real solution is dissolution. If the oppressive order dissolves, then the nightmare is over, but a vital piece of our identities, our cultural capitalist identities, is forever lost. The remaining answer is tantamount to apocalypse.

Apocalypse has three common definitions: literally the end of the world; a disaster or catastrophe that, while not really bringing about the end of the world, is so

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

complete that we get the sense that life will never be the same; a revelation or removing of illusion to show a hidden truth (Phillips 105). While the literal end of the world is best left to disaster films, life-changing catastrophes and revelations are the subject matter of the new horror film.

The most frightening apocalyptic form of today's horror is the revelation. The catastrophes of the films are significant, but they are not the ultimate theme. Rather, the catastrophes and disasters only lead to the revelation that the only real evil is inside ourselves and our culture. Tom Gunning, a film specialist with the University of Chicago, once mused, "Can a whole country have a nightmare? I think it's important to realize that a nightmare you always wake up from." (*The American Nightmare*). The medium of film gives us a glimpse into the cultural and societal nightmare of our last century, and shows us that our nightmare is one of the waking world, and as such is far more terrifying than any nightmare of dreams. And yet it is a nightmare, because as it progresses, all we can do is sleep in our powerlessness, shut ourselves off from the stimuli of madness, and know that every action we take contributes to the terror of our waking lives.

Adam Lowenstein from the University of Pittsburgh remarked in an interview that ...all those films show us over and over again the apocalypse isn't now; the apocalypse is always and ongoing, and there's no easy way to go back to before the apocalypse and there's no easy way to imagine a time after it. There's only this moment-to-moment struggle that we all are obligated to engage in (*The American Nightmare*).

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

In our case, the apocalypse does not come with the added mercy of the end. There may never be a time when we can look forward to our suffering coming to an end. As individuals we cannot change the capitalist status quo or release ourselves from our slavery, because our slavery is one of the moment. We cannot look toward the future because the bills must be paid now. Rather than plot how to overthrow the cannibal family, the army of zombies, or the legion of thirsty vampires, we can only respond in the moment, and we can only plot how to escape them now in order to live for more such moments. Likewise, we cannot plot the overthrow of the system when we must learn how to escape bankruptcy, repossession, and starvation now in order to live to do it all again. Ours is an apocalypse that brings no relief with it. It is an apocalypse that traps us in a cycle we cannot escape.

The apocalypse is chilling and earth-shattering to those of us safely accustomed to our average lives, but the apocalypse has a purpose. Apocalypse wreaks suffering, and ours may have no end, but the ultimate purpose of the apocalypse is to cleanse. Thus, the apocalypse must exist in order to give us a bittersweet hope for the future:

When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain (Marx 664).

In the end we face some hard speculations. If all members of our society had an equal chance to feed themselves, would we still be watching films about impoverished families

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

killing others to survive? If we utilized our technologies for the good of all, would we still be watching films about isolated workers facing that same technology as it cripples their lives and forces them into darkness? Without our consuming, destructive culture feeding off of others to survive, our nightmare would be quite different. We may always have a nightmare, with or without a social revolution, but the nature of nightmares is to end, just as it is the nature of people to will. Even if life can never be free from nightmares, understanding our nightmare could be the first step toward waking up from it.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Works Cited

- Affluenza*. Dir. Ellen Furnari. Bullfrog Films, 1997.
- The American Nightmare*. Dir. Adam Simon. Perf. John Carpenter, Wes Craven, David Cronenberg, and George A. Romero. Minerva Pictures, 2000.
- Barber, Benjamin R. *Con\$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.
- Becker, Matt. "A Point of Little Hope: Hippie Horror Films and the Politics of Ambivalence." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 2006 Spring. Issue 57.
- Block, Fred L. *The Vampire State, and Other Myths and Fallacies about the U.S. Economy*. New York: The New Press, 1996.
- Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Gary Oldman, Winona Ryder, Anthony Hopkins, and Keanu Reeves. Columbia Pictures, 1992.
- Charles Manson: Superstar*. Dir. Nikolas Schrek. Nar. Nikolas Schrek. Perf. Charles Manson. Video Werewolf, 1989.
- Churchill, Ward. "'Some People Push Back': On the Justice of Roosting Chickens."
- The Curse of Frankenstein*. Dir. Terence Fisher. Perf. Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, Hazel Court, and Robert Urquhart. Hammer Studios, 1957.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. David Emge, Ken Foree, and Scott H. Reiniger. UFCD, 1978.
- Day of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Lori Cardille, Terry Alexander, and Joseph Pilato. UFCD, 1985.
- Dracula 2000*. Dir. Patrick Lussier. Perf. Gerard Butler, Christopher Plummer, Jonny Lee Miller, and Justine Waddell. Miramax, 2000.
- Elert, Glenn. "Number of Cars." *The Physics Factbook*, 2001
<<http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2001/MarinaStasenko.shtml>>
- "Fastest-Growing Occupations." CareerOneStop. 2006
<<http://www.acinet.org/acinet/oview1.asp?printer=&next=oview1&level=Overall&optstatus=101000000&id=1&nodeid=3&socode=&stfips=00&jobfam=&group=1&showall=no>>

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Colin Clive, Mae Clark, John Boles, and Boris Karloff. 1931.

Friday the 13th. Dir. Sean S. Cunningham. Perf. Ari Lehman, Kevin Bacon, and Laurie Bartram. Paramount Pictures, 1980.

Friday the 13th Part 2. Dir. Steve Miner. Perf. Amy Steel, John Furey, and Warrington Gillette. Paramount Pictures, 1981.

Freeland, Cynthia. *The Naked and The Undead*. New York: Westview Press, 2001.

Halloween. Dir. John Carpenter. Perf. Donald Pleasence, Jamie Lee Curtis, Nanci Loomis, and P.J. Soles. Compass International Pictures, 1978.

Hellraiser. Dir. Clive Barker. Perf. Andrew Robinson, Clare Higgins, Ashley Laurence, and Doug Bradley. New World Pictures, 1987.

Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth. Dir. Anthony Hickox. Perf. Kevin Bernhardt, Terry Farrell, and Doug Bradley. Miramax, 1992.

Hellraiser: Inferno. Dir. Scott Derrickson. Perf. Craig Sheffer, Nicholas Turturro, and Doug Bradley. Miramax, 2000.

The Hills Have Eyes. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Susan Lanier, Robert Houston, Martin Speer, and Dee Wallace. New Line Cinema, 1977.

The Hills Have Eyes. Dir. Alexandre Aja. Perf. Aaron Stanford, Kathleen Quinlan, Vinessa Shaw, Emilie de Ravin, and Dan Byrd. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006.

"Hunger and Poverty Statistics." *America's Second Harvest*. 2006.
<http://www.secondharvest.org/learn_about_hunger/fact_sheet/poverty_stats.html>

Kelly, Christopher. "Terror Alert: How *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* Introduced us to Pure Dread." *Texas Monthly*. 2006 September, 54-56.

Last House on the Left. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Sandra Cassel, Lucy Grantham, and David Hess. Hallmark Entertainment, 1972.

Marx, Karl. "The Future Results of British Rule in India." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Kenneth Branagh, Robert De Niro, Tom Hulce, and Helena Bonham Carter. Columbia Tristar, 1994.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Nelson, John S. "Horror Films Face Political Evils in Everyday Life." *Political Communication*. 22: 381-386, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?" *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Vintage, 1967 (1885).
- A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Ronee Blakley. New Line Cinema, 1984.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Duane Jones, Judith O'Dea, Karl Hardman, Marilyn Eastman, and Keith Wayne. New Line Cinema, 1968.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005.
- Reichert, Alan K., Michael Small, and Sunil Mohanty. "The Impact of Landfills on Residential Property Values." *The Journal of Real Estate Research*. 1992 Summer. Vol. 7, No. 23, 297-314.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- The Satanic Rites of Dracula*. Dir. Alan Gibson. Perf. Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing, and Joanna Lumley. Hammer Studios, 1973.
- Scanners*. Dir. David Cronenberg. Perf. Stephen Lack, Patrick McGoochan, and Michael Ironside. AVCO, 1981.
- Shah, Anup. "U.S. Foreign Aid and Assistance." *Sustainable Development*. 8 April 2007. <<http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp#Aidmoneyisactuallywaybelowwhathasbeenpromised>>
- "South Carolina Indicators Project – Environment." *Institute for Public Service and Policy Research*. University of South Carolina, 2007. <<http://www.ipspr.sc.edu/scip/enviro/waste.asp>>
- "Statistical Information on the Casualties of the Vietnam War." *National Archives*. 2007 February. <<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>>

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Our Collective Nightmare

Sternbergh, Adam. "Up With Grups." *New York Magazine*. 26 March 2006.

Stone, Bryan. "The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films." *Journal of Religion and Film*. 2001 Oct. Vol. 5, Issue 5.

Taste the Blood of Dracula. Dir. Peter Sasdy. Perf. Christopher Lee, Geoffrey Keen, and Anthony Higgins. Hammer Studios, 1970.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Perf. Marilyn Burns, Gunnar Hansen, and Paul A. Partain. Bryanston Pictures, 1974.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Dir. Marcus Nispel. Perf. Jessica Biel, Eric Balfour, Andrew Bryniarski, and R. Lee Ermey. New Line Cinema, 2003.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: A Family Portrait Revisited. Dir. Brad Shellady. Perf. Gunnar Hansen, Edwin Neal, and Jim Siedow. MTI Home Video, 1988.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning. Dir. Jonathan Liebesman. Perf. Jordana Brewster, Matthew Bomer, Andrew Bryniarski, and R. Lee Ermey. New Line Cinema, 2006.

"U.S. Auto Sales Analysis." Morgan and Company, 2007.
<<http://www.morgancom.com/salesanalysis.htm>>

"U.S. Bankruptcy Court Table F-2" U.S. Courts, 2005.
< <http://www.uscourts.gov/bnkrpctstats/bankruptcystats.htm>>

"Usual Sunday Attendance." Church Society. 2003.
<http://www.churchsociety.org/issues_new/church/stats/iss_church_stats_attendance.asp#USA>

"War Casualties Pass 9/11 Death Toll." CBS News. 22 September 2006.
<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/22/terror/main2035427.shtml#ccmm>>

Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*. London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984. 164-200

"World Trade Organization." *Global Exchange*. 28 October 2007.
<<http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/wto/>>